Signed

Compliments of the author
Donald Edward Mirone

VALIANT HEARTS

by

Donald Edward Micue

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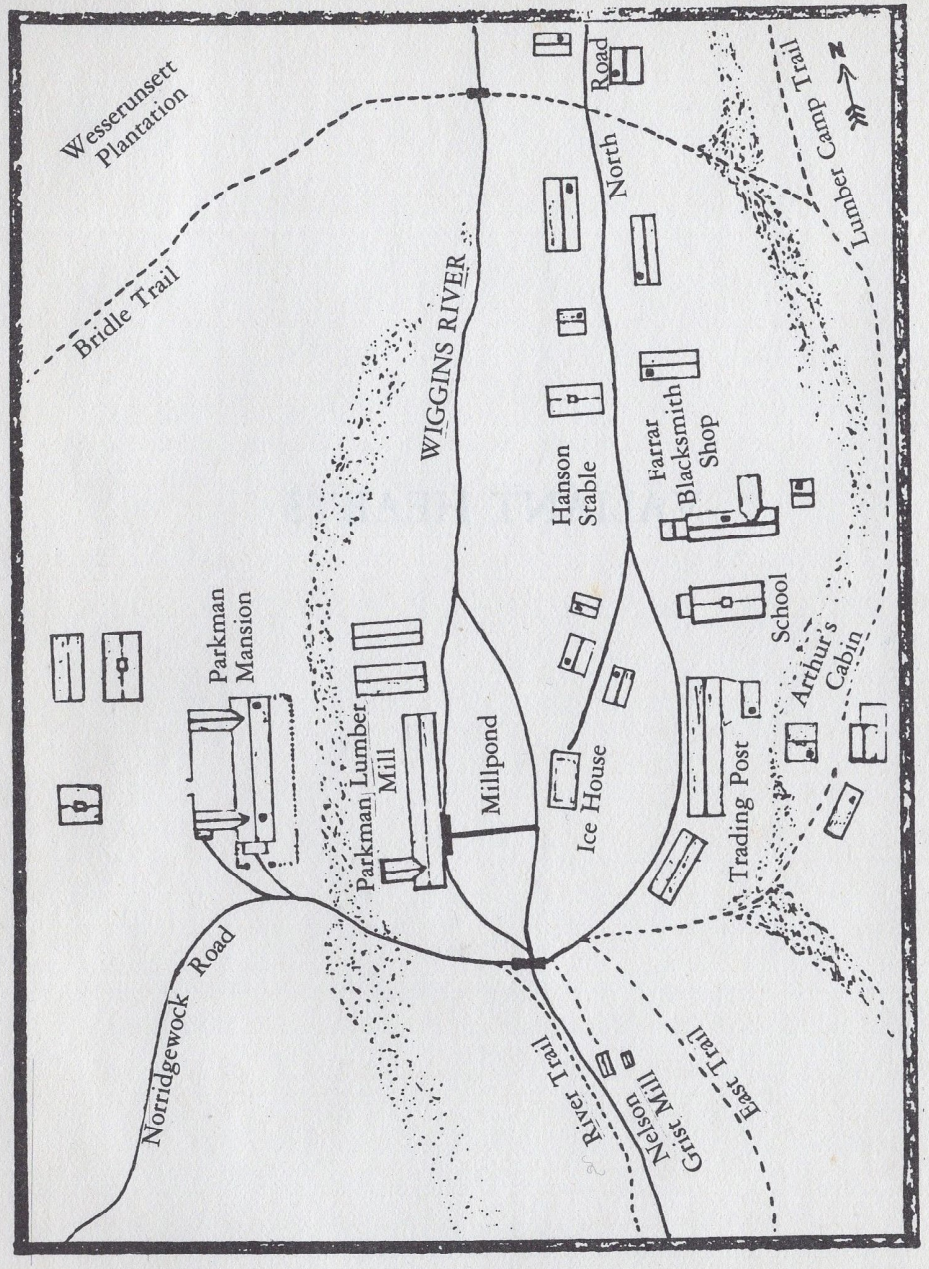


WIGGINS VALLEY
1788

PART ONE
Margaret Parkman and Friends

Chapter I

In his twenty fourth year, Arthur Saint-Pierre, an intense young man with a zest for living, found himself struggling to preserve his customary optimism. He had suffered the first serious threat to his satisfaction with life. Saddened by the sudden untimely death of his adored father, he was additonally troubled over the possibility of another loss—the loss of someone he loved with a passion he had never dared to declare—the loss of someone not actually his to lose.

In the late afternoon chill of a New England spring day, typical of crisp April days in Wiggins Valley, Arthur stood alone, staring disconsolately at a mound of earth covering the grave of the only natural parent he had ever known.

"Adieu, mon père," he murmured. "I pray you find in death the happiness you had so little of in life."

Arthur's long hair, black as a raven's wing and straight as an Indian's, was windwhipped by a cold breeze swirling across the east rim of the valley. The somber gaze of the solitary youth was fixed upon the head of the grave where a short length of white pine board, affixed crosswise to an upright stake, bore a legend that read:

Here lies M. Edouard-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.
Born July 3, 1742. Departed this life April 20, 1788.

Reluctant to leave his father's resting place, Arthur stood in the fading light, contemplating the sprigs of green holly leaves, the fragrant arbutus blossoms, and the cluster of windflowers with which he had adorned the burial mound. When he finally

turned toward his cabin he walked as an Indian walks, with scarcely a sound. Friends knew him to be much taller than either of his parents. His lithe form, clad in soft buckskins, was bent slightly against the stiff breeze surging across the clearing.

The Saint-Pierre cabin stood at the western edge of a clearing overlooking the valley. Some two hundred yards long and nearly as wide, the cleared area was of sufficient size to accommodate a stable, a drying shed, and a small garden. Arthur had selected his father's final place of rest with an eye to the attractiveness of its surrounding. Towering white pines, by a fortunate chance, formed a natural semicircle around the spot and the son took some small comfort from the sylvan beauty of the burial site. Soon he would journey to Norridgewock, a town on the Kennebec River and arrange with a stonecutter for a suitable headstone to replace the wooden cross he had fashioned. The Saint-Pierres had wrested their livelihood from the forest. They had helped to harvest the wealth of its timber: fir and spruce and the lofty pines that could produce a board forty feet long without a knot. They had utilized the special qualities of the picturesque white birches, the aromatic cedars, the giant yellow birches, the sugar maples, and the grey-barked beeches with their prodigal yield of succulent nuts. Arthur had learned to trap the otter, the sable, and the plentiful beaver. His father had schooled him thoroughly in the special skills of an expert woodsman. The elder Saint-Pierre had been an accomplished axe man, one of the stalwarts who selected and felled the stately white pines that became masts for the Royal British Navy.

The Valley, watered by the Wiggins River, lay secluded in the approximate geographical center of the heavily wooded confines of a tract known as the Wesserunsett Plantation. The Plantation, named in honor of a noble Indian chief whose exploits were deemed memorable, encompassed a lush, sparsely settled, and indifferently mapped territory lying east of the mighty Kennebec River. Hordes of adventurers, some famous, some infamous, had sailed into history by way of the Kennebec. That restless Maine waterway would become the pathway to wealth and fame for others seeking their fortunes in the New World. The luxuriant verdure on either side of the river concealed the scars of scores of bloody battles that had been waged under the banners of foreign

governments seeking control of the New England territory. The Kennebec, which should have been a passageway to glory, had been instead a path to disaster for the controversial Benedict Arnold, called "The Dark Eagle" by Natanis, the Abenaki Indian chief who predicted Arnold's eventual disgrace.

Evening had almost fallen when Arthur pushed open the back door of his cabin. As he entered, a very old dog of obviously mixed ancestry arose from a comfortable spot near the fireplace. With tail wagging, the aged animal watched while Arthur lighted a candle and punched up the dying embers of the fire. From a pile beside the hearth Arthur selected a large log and laid it upon the glowing coals. The dog, meanwhile, had gone to sit by the door and await the appearance of his other master. His pathetic posture of expectancy brought tears to Arthur's eyes. He knelt and placed his arm gently across the old dog's shoulders.

"Rusty, old friend," he said, "we're alone now. He's gone where we are not allowed to follow just yet." And then he added, "Let us hope this is our only loss."

The dog licked Arthur's cheek and whined faintly. It would be many days before he would cease to sit and wait for the only other human on whom he had lavished his canine affection. The finality of death was beyond Rusty's ken.

Finding himself reduced to tears was a novel experience for Arthur Saint-Pierre. In his veins flowed a life stream heavily laced with the blood of the stoical Abenaki Indians. In early times French traders engaged in the practice of sending selected French youths to live among the Indians, with instructions to become their blood brothers. The young men, known as "*coureurs de bois,*" were the instruments of an experiment designed to cultivate the friendship and loyalty of the Indian trappers. It was supposed that this artificial kinship would result in the French having first claim to the bulk of the valuable traffic in furs to be sold at a huge profit in the European market. In time, the French youth came to embrace the habits and, in some cases, even the thought processes of their adopted brothers. Some took Indian wives. Arthur's mother was born of such a union. Called "Little Star" by her tribe, she took the name "Marie" when she married Arthur's father. Ethereally beautiful, Marie was beloved by her husband with a devotion approaching worship. Unfortunately, a few days

after Arthur's birth, she died. The care of her infant son was taken over by a married sister. It was from the sister's ample healthy breasts that the boy suckled the first of the fine strength and vigor he was to enjoy all his life.

Arthur never severed completely his ties with the Indians, even after he went to live with his father in Wiggins Valley. It was from the Indians that he had learned the artifices and skills of a fur trapper. He had been taught to dress in the colors of the forest and to travel swiftly, making little noise. His Indian friends showed him how to notch the sugar maples and gather the sap, which was then boiled down to a syrup of ambrosial sweetness. Arthur's enthusiastic participation in the strenuous Indian games endowed him with superb muscular development and amazing physical endurance. He absorbed much of the stoical Indian reserve, ever at odds with his tendency toward the high-spirited volatility of his French ancestors. He spent many hours sitting enthralled at the feet of the ancients of the tribe while they related stories of the heroic past in which the Indians played a major role. In the Indian view, it was the expansionist greed of foreign governments and the ruthless tactics of their explorer-soldiers that precipitated the bloody Indian wars. Arthur was told that beneath the verdant surface of peaceful Wiggins Valley lay the blood and bones of unnumbered fighting men: Indian, French, and English. The claim to sovereignty in the New World had rested on the conquest and occupation of the land. John Cabot, a native of Genoa and a citizen of Venice, in 1497 took possession of the entire eastern coastal areas of North America in the name of Henry VII of England. France's claim to more or less the same territory rested on the expedition of one Giovanni di Verrazano, Italian by birth but sailing under French colors. He called the region New France. Over the centuries that followed, innumerable wars were fought and thousands died. The Indians struggled in vain to retain control of their lands. In self-defense some tribes fought with the French, some with the English. Certain of the great Indian nations undertook to preserve their own integrity and for seventy-five years the horrible Indian wars struck terror into the hearts of the colonists. Many a hardy pioneer went to sleep at night with a loaded musket at his bedside, only to be surprised and slaughtered, along with his entire family, by Indians

whose approach was as silent as a shadow. In the end the conquering hordes from overseas prevailed and the Indian nations were reduced to impotence, leaving the French and English to settle their differences. Finally, in 1759, when Arthur's father was seventeen, French dominion in New England came to an end by arbitration in the aftermath of a decisive battle on the Plains of Abraham in which Major General Wolfe lost his life. Shortly thereafter all Canada fell to England. Establishment of territorial boundaries brought an end to the fighting but not an end to race prejudice. In 1788, French families who lived in upper New England were still looked upon as second-class citizens, and in most cases treated accordingly by the English. Arthur's father was a notable exception. He had refused to swear allegiance to either the French or the English while the two combatants were at odds over the possession of the Province of Maine. Despite his French ancestry Saint-Pierre was, with few exceptions, admired and respected by English and French alike. When he became interested in the fine spread of timberland on the eastern plateau above Wiggins Valley and wished to purchase it, he met with little resistance from the English land company officials who negotiated the sale. Through the intervention of General Benedict Arnold, Saint-Pierre also acquired title to a parcel of valuable riverside property some twenty miles south and west of his Valley holdings. Near that point the Wiggins River empties into the Kennebec, somewhat south of Skowhegan Island in Canaan Plantation. Saint-Pierre worried constantly over the reliability of his land titles because of the hopelessly complicated history of the territory when titles were too often conferred with little regard for the rights of the previous owner. So diligent were his efforts to protect his titles that, at the time of his death, his property claims were found to be entirely legal and binding, much to the chagrin of Winston Parkman, the leading citizen of Wiggins Valley. Parkman, an irascible and ruthless Englishman, owned nearly half the land in Wiggins Valley. Parkman harbored an ill-concealed contempt for all persons of French extraction, the Saint-Pierres in particular, and felt no compulsion to associate with them unless compelled to do so for business reasons. Edouard Saint-Pierre disliked Parkman but opposed him only in a passive way by refusing to consider selling to the

Englishman. Parkman was also openly contemptuous of Saint-Pierre's loyalty to Benedict Arnold. Along with hundreds of other men, Edouard had fallen under the spell of Arnold's charismatic personality. His admiration for the Colonel had prompted him to take service in the ill-fated march on Quebec that ended in disaster shortly after Christmas 1775. Eddie Saint-Pierre, as his comrades called him, was one of the few hundred to survive that futile trek. Undaunted by the experience, Saint-Pierre clung to his blind devotion to Arnold. With stubborn loyalty he sought to explain and excuse the then General's defection in 1780. So persuasive were his sincere arguments in favor of the General's behavior that Arthur became convinced that his father's assessment of Arnold was reasonable and probably accurate. Arthur, unfortunately, chose to share his opinion with Meg Parkman, his close friend from whom he kept no secrets save that he was hopelessly and passionately in love with her. No complication would have arisen if Meg had not told her father of Arthur's favorable appraisal of Arnold's traitorous conduct. Parkman was incensed over the "half-breed Frenchman's" attempt to fill his daughter's head with such nonsense and had taken Arthur to task, publicly, in language profane and insulting. From then, his public dressing down had been on Arthur's mind constantly, even on the day of his father's interment.

Arthur was desolate over his father's sudden passing and, as he sat staring dejectedly into the fireplace, there was another deep hurt that plagued him: Meg Parkman, his childhood friend, had not attended his father's funeral.

Chapter 2

The dark shroud of a cold moonless night that settled over the valley was a reminder that a severe New England winter had only recently relaxed its icy grip on the countryside. The cheery flames in Arthur's fireplace cast a warm and welcome glow across the interior of the cabin. Arthur had fed the dog and had finished feeding himself, with little enthusiasm. At a sturdy deal table he sat trying to concentrate on the text of a treasured book of poetry. The small leather-bound volume, a gift from his father,

was a colection of French *chansons de geste,* epic poems of earlier centuries. While learning to translate the poetic accounts of heroic deeds, Arthur, with his father's help, had gained a working knowledge of classical French, so unlike the patois of the lumber camp crewmen.

Suddenly Rusty raised his head and growled at the sound of footsteps approaching the back door. As the sound grew louder, the dog's growl changed to a friendly whimper and his tail thumped the floor weakly. He had recognized the familiar footfalls of an old friend who walked with a slight limp.

There was a vigorous banging of knuckles on the back door.

"Hey, Art! It's me—Eli!"

No one ever called him "Art" except Eli Farrar, the settlement blacksmith.

"Come in, come in, Eli!" shouted Arthur and stood to welcome the man who had been his father's close friend.

Arthur was always at ease whenever Eli was around and the blacksmith, a wise and charitable man, always seemed to know when to be around. Lacking in formal education and sometimes profane of speech, Eli possessed a wealth of inborn common sense. Arthur delighted in setting him off on almost any subject. Eli would ramble on like a meandering brook but never failed to make sense. Valley people had long since learned that Eli's observations on the human scene and his advice in any situation ought never to be taken lightly.

The blacksmith, a powerfully built man, was hatless and wore a betasseled leather jerkin over his heavy shirt. He carried a lanthorn in one hand and a leather pouch in the other.

"Eli, my friend," said Arthur, "you don't know how glad I am to see you this evening. I hope you can stay awhile."

"Don't see no reason why not," said Eli. "I sort of figured you might like a little company."

Eli blew out the flame in his lanthorn, which he deposited on the floor beside the fireplace. Rusty accepted a friendly pat on his head, sniffed briefly at Eli's boots, then retired to his favorite spot near the warm hearth.

"Tell you one thing, Art," said Eli. "I'd a sight rather be up here than down to the trading post tonight. I walked by there on the way up and saw Dutch Nelson going in the front door

with that danged bagpipe of his. I swear, when he gets warmed up on that thing it sounds like something dying and dying hard! But I guess that's about all you can expect from a Dutchman trying to imitate a Scotchman—or maybe an Irisher. Never did know for sure who invented that screeching bag of wind!"

Arthur grinned, in spite of his somber mood, and gestured toward one of two rocking chairs facing the fireplace—comfortable, well-built chairs, upholstered with beaver fur; examples of the skill of Edouard Saint-Pierre as a maker of furniture. Arthur would remember always how often his father had sat in his chair and dozed after a hard day and a hearty supper. Almost anyone but Eli Farrar would have looked out of place in his father's chair, but the blacksmith did not. Like Arthur's father, Eli was a short, stockily built man with broad, muscular shoulders. A close friendship had existed between the two men and Eli had come to be regarded by Arthur as one of the family.

"Say, I like that jacket," said Arthur. "When did you start wearing tassels?"

Eli grinned and stroked his luxurious full beard.

"Sort of fancy, ain't it? Bought it when I was down to Pittson last fall but never wore it until today. It's comfortable because it don't have no sleeves. Them leather coats Fairbrother carries at the post are too danged tight across the shoulders for me. Lots of men were wearing a jacket like this down to my old home town. I reckon you know Pittson's where I used to live before I met your father. That's where I learned my smithing. Funny how things work out. A few months before I got acquainted with your father I did some ironwork for a man who was partly responsible for getting your father and me in a peck of trouble."

"I don't recall my father telling me about that," said Arthur. "What happened?"

"Did he ever mention a man named Major Colburn?"

"Yes," replied Arthur. "He said Colburn was the man who built the bateaux for General Arnold's expedition."

"That's him!" snorted Eli. "Them bateaux weren't worth a tinker's dam! I said so the minute I laid eyes on them. They were made out of pine so danged green it was soaking wet. I smacked one of them planks with a hammer and the sap squirted me in the face. Colburn should have had more sense. You can't

use lumber as green as that stuff was. Them bateaux weighed twice as much as they should have. Believe me, we soon found out how heavy they were when we got up to Fort Halifax and had to carry around them falls. It took at least a half-dozen men on a side to pick up one of them clumsy things. When we got up to Great Falls, over to Norridgewock, we sweated blood making that carry. The river drops ninety feet in a little over a mile. I kept wondering how far up the river we'd get before them leaky mud scows would fall apart, which they did later on. I guess you know your father took up with the expedition over to Great Falls."

"I remember very well," said Arthur. "I wanted to go along but he wouldn't hear of it. Said it was no place for an eleven-year-old. He sent me packing up north to live with my mother's sister. I wondered at the time whether my father expected to get back from Quebec in one piece."

"He wasn't the only one wondering about that," said Eli. "Things started to go wrong soon's we left Great Falls. Them danged bateaux began to open up at the seams and we lost a lot of our grub and supplies. The weather turned bitter cold, earlier'n usual. There was ice in the swamps and it snowed a lot. I had a real bad accident in one of them spruce bogs. Ripped my leg open, clean to the bone, on one of them snags. Just like razors, they was. Most of the grub for our squad got watersoaked. It wasn't fit to eat so we had to go on rations. We pretty near starved to death! Some dogs followed us up the trail and you can guess why none of them ever came back. Some of us had left home wearing old boots which wore through and we had to wrap our feet in rags. Almost all of us got diarrhea worse'n any diarrhea I ever heard tell of. So many of us got sick that the officers decided to build a hospital shack. Your father managed to stay well enough to help build one and that's where they left me because I couldn't walk more'n a few steps. My leg was a mess! I thought I was going to lose it but, of course, I didn't. Still bothers me some, even today. Believe me, I've never hankered to take another trip like that!"

"I don't blame you," said Arthur. "You know, Eli, my father would never say much about that compaign but Seth Perkins once told me that over half of the eleven hundred men involved

in that expedition never came back. I suppose my father felt that it would reflect badly on General Arnold to admit what a disaster that trip was."

Eli nodded in agreement and fell silent for a few moments. Above the fire place hung two flintlock muskets. Eli stared at the muskets for several seconds and when he turned to face Arthur his eyes held the look of a man bemused by memories.

"Art," he said, "your father was as brave a man as I ever knew. He stuck with Arnold clear up to the Chaudière River country. then he got sick, real bad. They said he was out of his head for a while. When he was able to walk he came back down to the hospital where I was. I never saw such a change in a man in such a short time. He was just skin and bones and nothing much else. By that time, I was able to get around after a fashion. We laid around the shack for a couple of days and then your father said we ought to head for home before the weather got any worse. You should have seen us! It was like the blind leading the blind. Your father couldn't keep hardly anything on his stomach except water. My leg was hurting so bad it was teeth gritting to put my weight on it. One night your father had a bad spell and I was afraid he was a goner. He turned white as a sheet. First he'd shiver and then he'd sweat and he couldn't stand on his feet. I built up a roaring fire and wrapped him up the best I could. Your father wasn't a drinking man, but I made him take a couple of healthy swigs from a bottle I swiped when we left the hospital. That perked him up a little and along towards morning he slept an hour or so. When he woke up he felt pretty good, so he said, and nothing to do but we must start back down the trail. We made it home, of course, and stayed here in this cabin for three months before he sent word for you to come home. I guess the reason Ed never sent for you until spring was he didn't want you to see how bad he looked. Your father got better in a hurry with good food in his stomach every day. He had some salve to put on my game leg and made me set around and do nothing. That gash in my leg kept draining for close to three weeks before it begun to heal. Art, your father was a mighty good friend to me. He wouldn't hear of my leaving until I was almost as good as new. He's the one who got me to move up here from Pittston and I ain't never been sorry."

Arthur and the blacksmith sat and talked about old times for the better part of an hour, each trying in his own way, with anecdotes and reminiscences, to dispel some of the gloom each felt over the untimely loss of father and friend.

"Eli, let me ask you something. Do you believe my father's opinion of General Arnold was accurate? I'm sure you know how put out he would get when anyone referred to Arnold as a traitor. He told me things that, if true, would almost excuse the General for going over to the British. He said that the General had a few powerful enemies who swore to bring him down. He claimed that Arnold was courtmartialed unjustly because of false accusations leveled against him by the president and secretary of the Pennsylvania council He said they were jealous of him because of his popularity among his men and because General Washington favored him. According to my father, General Arnold spent large amounts of his own money on the Quebec and other campaigns and was never reimbursed as promised. There were other things such as his being passed over in rank by five other officers who weren't nearly as able as Arnold. My father certainly made a good case in favor of the General. What do you think, Eli?"

"Well now," said Eli, "I can't say for sure whether all the stories are true but if your father believed them I'll bet they ain't far off the mark. I know one thing—Arnold's men swore by him. Myself, I wasn't exactly crazy about him after that Quebec mess."

Arthur smiled wryly.

"There are other folks who aren't exactly crazy about him or my opinion of him."

"So I hear," said Eli with a chuckle. "I expect you're referring to the going over you took from old man Parkman. I wasn't around at the time but it's all over the settlement how he laid into you, right out in the middle of the street, over something you told Margaret. They said he was hollering loud enough to be heard a mile away!"

Arthur scowled at the memory.

"Eli, I felt like a fool! I kept wishing he was a man my own age and somebody besides Meg's father, but he wasn't so I just stood there and took it until he ran out of cuss words."

Eli tugged at his beard and chuckled again.

"I'm sure it wasn't funny to you, but I wish I could have seen

that scrawny old bird screaming and flailing his arms around like a windmill! Must have been some sight! What set him off anyway? He never lit into you like that before, did he?"

Arthur leaned forward and jabbed angrily at the fire with a hardwood stick.

"No, that was the first time and I'm still wondering why he was in such a vile mood. That silly business about Arnold didn't warrant all that heat. There has to be more to it than that. For one thing I haven't been able to talk to Meg since it happened. You notice she didn't come to the funeral. I haven't had a glimpse of her in over a week. I tried to call on her the day before my father died but Parkman met me at the door and ordered me off his property!"

"That stuck-up old grouch!" said Eli with a scowl. "Knowing him I ain't surprised. Winston Parkman is a far cry from his old man. Monty Parkman was a Loyalist but he was as fine a gentleman as you'd ever want to meet. None of his good manners ever rubbed off on Winston—not a danged little bit! Talk to Seth Perkins some time. He'll tell you how Winston switched horses in the middle of the stream and made out like he was against the king. He probably figured the colonists were going to win and he wanted to be sure his bread was buttered on the winning side. Just the same, he thinks the only decent people on earth are the English. He has very little use for others, especially the French, and that takes in an awful lot of folks in these parts, including you and your father. I expect you're sort of special because you're sweet on his daughter."

Arthur's head came up.

"Who is saying I'm sweet on Meg? I've never told anybody that, least of all Meg!"

"Come on, Art! This is Eli you're talking to. I've known you since you were twelve years old. You're in love with Margaret Parkman, all right. You ought to see your face when you talk about her."

Arthur's agitation was evident as he again jabbed at the fire.

"Yes, I guess it would be noticeable to someone who knows me as well as you do. I admit I love her—have loved her for a long time. But, Eli, I'm sure Meg doesn't know. I've never had nerve enough to say anything to her. We've been friends ever

since we were little kids but that's all. In the first place she's way out of my class. You must know that. She and her cousin Sybil are at ease among Sybil's circle of friends in Norridgewock's so-called better class, where I would stick out like a sore thumb. Besides, she has always treated me like a brother. Sometimes she even gives me advice, as if she were my mother—and she's four years younger than I am! The way things stand, she'd laugh in my face if I tried to make love to her!"

"Uh-huh," said Eli skeptically. "If you say so I'll take your word for it."

There seemed to be little point in pursuing the subject further. Eli held up the large leather pouch he had been holding in his lap.

"Art, it's time I went home but before I go let me tell you about this pouch your father gave me for safekeeping that winter after we got back from up north. He must have figured I'd outlive him because he asked me to keep it until he wasn't around any longer and then give it to you—unless he came for it sooner. There's a raft of papers in here but I only know about three of them. One is his will—I know because I witnessed it. The other two are the deeds to your property. Your father came and got them deeds twice and took them over to Norridgewock just to make sure the titles were still good. Never could figure why Ed didn't put all this stuff in Fairbrother's safe down to the post, instead of leaving it with me."

Arthur's high regard for the blacksmith showed in his eyes as he took the pouch from Eli.

"Eli, maybe you don't know why he gave those things into your keeping but I do. My father trusted you more than any man alive. He said, more than once, that he would trust you with his life, if it came to that."

Eli swallowed a sudden lump in his throat.

"Yes, I guess I know that," he said gruffly. "I'd have done the same. We went through a lot together. Well, I better be going."

From the kindling box beside the fireplace Eli selected a splinter, ignited it and lighted his lanthorn.

"Good night, son," he said. "You know, I have a hunch them other papers may tell you why old man Parkman is so dead set against you. I know one thing—there was never any love lost 'tween him and your father."

Chapter 3

The candles were burning low and the fire was little more than ashes when Arthur finished examining the papers contained in the pouch Eli had brought him.

His father's simple will made Arthur the sole owner of all Saint-Pierre property. Deeds and surveyor maps set forth the extent and descriptions of two parcels of land: one, eight hundred acres of timber land, including the clearing where the cabin stood, and two, fifty acres of riverside property located some twenty-one miles southwest of Wiggins Valley, on the east bank of the Kennebec River. The pouch also contained many pages devoted to family history. Saint-Pierre had been a painstaking journal keeper and the genealogical data and comments were of absorbing interest to Arthur. The historical information was liberally sprinkled with editorial commentaries reflecting conditions in the valley. Arthur was intrigued by his father's caustic remarks concerning an invisible line of demarcation, an intangible barrier that appeared to exist between the French families in the north end of the Valley and the "better element" living in the south end.

"We are an exception," Arthur's father had written. "Most of the townspeople are our friends and do not appear to resent our presence as the only property owners of French extraction in the south end of the valley, but we have an enemy in Winston Parkman. The war has been over for many years but old prejudices die hard sometimes. Parkman despises the French and our family in particular, perhaps with some reason."

Since Arthur had already experienced a sample of Parkman's temper he was not surprised at his father's opinion of the Englishman. At the same time, he was unable to understand what his father meant.

He was about to learn.

The last article in the pouch was a sealed envelope bearing Arthur's name. Inside were several pages of paper closely written in Saint-Pierre's excellent—if a trifle flowery—French. The first page was dated 22 March 1776 and was obviously written shortly after Arthur's father returned from Quebec.

The letter was addressed "To my dear son Arthur" and read as follows:

"I am still recovering from a disastrous tour of duty with General Arnold's troops during the course of which I went as close to death as I have ever been and the experience reminded me that life is always an uncertain adventure. On the chance that I might not have another opportunity I am going to set down some of my thoughts that are likely to be of interest to you and also relate a story that I have never told you; an episode that reflects no credit upon our family name. You will see in this affair a partial explanation for the coolness that exists between Winston Parkman and me. By the time you read this, you may have heard the story from someone who is unlikely to be in possession of all the facts. I think it is important that you know the truth of the matter and not some garbled version of it. I was never out of sympathy with the two principals involved, as you will readily understand. To the best of my knowledge there is only one other person in Wiggins Valley who knows how this unfortunate affair ended and that person is Seth Perkins, the patriarch of our settlement. I never knew how Seth came by his knowledge of the way the affair started and it really doesn't matter. What is significant is that Perkins never told Winston Parkman the whole story. Not even I knew all the details until months after the persons involved had left the valley. I questioned Seth closely and he swore he had never talked to anyone but Parkman. He promised me he would never reveal what he knew to anyone else. I believe he meant what he said. Seth is something of a busybody, but I think he is a man of his word.

"You are aware that I had a brother, your uncle Jean, who once lived in Norridgewock and was said to have drowned when you were nine years old. It is true that he drowned, but there is more to the story than that.

"Abigail Parkman, Margaret's mother, was a long-suffering, hard-working wife but Parkman's treatment of her was unbelievably vile. Her status in the Parkman household was scarcely above that of a lackey and her husband's sadistic abuse of her was common knowledge in the valley. I doubt he ever loved Abigail, as I understand love, but he certainly resented losing her. And lose her he did. Abigail happened to be visiting her sister-in-law in Norridgewock when she met my brother. Even Seth could not say how they happened to become acquainted, but obviously they

did meet and were mutually attracted. What happened after that is a story as old as history. They contrived to see each other often enough to fall in love. By chance, Seth became aware of their clandestine meetings and was not surprised when Jean succeeded in getting Abigail to go away with him. Parkman never saw his wife again. He has always given out the story that she was in a boating accident and drowned in the Great Eddy below Skowhegan Falls. Her body, she says, was never recovered. Seth told Parkman in private that Abigail and Jean left the valley together but he could not say what became of them. I myself did not learn that until over a year after they disappeared. The Indians of your mother's tribe knew Jean and told me that he and a woman with him were drowned in white water on the Piscataquis River. From their description of the woman I was sure she was Abigail. The Indians buried the bodies, which were badly decomposed and battered almost beyond recognition. I went to Seth with my information and we both agreed that there was no point in stirring up a scandal so we let the matter drop. If Parkman had been a different sort of man we might have decided to ease his mind concerning his wife's fate, but Winston Parkman never was and probably never will be the type of person who arouses compassion. So it turned out that Abigail Parkman met her death by drowning but not the way Parkman tells it.

"There, my son, in this tale of star-crossed lovers lies the reason that the name of Saint-Pierre is hateful to Winston Parkman. It is probable that the loss of his wife helped to render him an even more irascible character than he already was. He is a moody, unfriendly man, very difficult to deal with, as his sawmill employees admit privately. Tread warily in any dealings you may have with him in the future. While we were not directly involved in Jean's misconduct, in Parkman's mind we are guilty by association. I do not excuse Jean for what he did but I cannot find it in my heart to condemn Abigail for running away from a situation little short of bondage. She must have found some measure of happiness with Jean. In our family we love and cherish our women, though not always wisely it seems.

"Margaret was five years old when her mother disappeared and I am sure she was never told what really happened. Parkman is not one to admit, even in his own mind, that he lost his wife

because she could no longer put up with his abusive treatment. Don't be surprised if, as you grow older, your relations with Margaret are watched closely by her father. After all, you are one of the rascally Saint-Pierres who go about stealing other men's wives!

"Arthur, my dear son, almost twelve years have passed since your lovely mother went to her reward. I wish with all my heart that she could see how strong and healthy you are and what a fine mind you have. It may be that she knows anyway—who can say. I don't think I have ever told you that I love you, so let this record show that I love you very much, especially since you were a gift to me from your wonderful mother. I wish for you much success and happiness.

"One further observation: if you never become romantically attracted to your little friend Margaret the story I have told you will have little impact on your relations with her but nobody knows what the future may hold. It could be that circumstances may dictate that I show you this letter before you get into trouble with Parkman. We shall see. With love from your father, Edouard."

Arthur reread the last page of his father's letter. Obviously affected, he rose and began to pace the floor. "Romantically attracted" was the phrase his father had used. What a pale description of his regard for Meg—of the passion that colored his existence—of the longing and love he had never ventured to declare! Never in Meg's attitude toward him had he ever detected anything but a sisterly frankness. She seemed to disdain the artifices of her sex in her dealings with all men. Perhaps it is just as well, he thought, that her feeling for me is nothing beyond friendship. I shudder to think what Parkman would do if he thought Meg loved me, a Saint-Pierre!

Arthur now had the rest of the answer to Parkman's animosity. He had always known that Meg's father held him in contempt because of his racial background—because he was a "half-breed," as Parkman put it. In the light of what he had learned from his father's letter, he could see why his very name was an added handicap. The old man's attack on him had been venomous and now he understood why. All things considered it was possible that Parkman's hostility had led him to take stern measures with

Meg. Perhaps that was why she had dropped out of sight for over a week.

All at once the atmosphere in the cabin seemed stifling. Arthur threw on his jacket and hurried out the front door. The old dog raised his head, but decided no action was required and remained stretched out in his usual spot.

The edge of the plateau was only a few feet in front of the cabin. Arthur stepped forward until he could see down into the valley. The sky was clear and objects below were dimly visible under the faint light from countless numbers of stars. The Wiggins River, boiling at flood stage upstream, lost its violence as it encountered the calm waters of the millpond in the center of the settlement. Here, the stream was opposed by a wooden dam and a sluiceway that directed part of the flood against the vanes of a huge undershot water wheel providing power for Parkman's sawmill on the west bank. The millpond was full to overflowing and the excess water poured over the lip of the dam, to crash in white spray on crags below. A few yards below the dam, the swollen stream, gathering speed once more, swirled angrily beneath a covered bridge and raced on toward its junction with the Kennebec twenty miles away. Beyond the bridge no part of the Wiggins was navigable. It wound a torturous swift way through a series of narrow gorges strewn with huge boulders and flinty outcroppings. In one gorge the stream fell sixty feet in a roaring waterfall, a spectacular sight during the high-water season. No one had ever been known to survive an accidental fall into the angry waters of the lower Wiggins at flood stage.

The only road from Norridgewock into the settlement came down the west slope, crossed on the covered bridge, and, turning north, followed a course roughly parallel to the river. Beside the road, close under the east rim of the valley, stood the two barnlike buildings of the Fairbrother trading post. From his vantage point, Arthur could look almost straight down onto the roofs of the post. Across the road from the trading post, hard by the millpond, stood a huge icehouse, a community project. The men of the valley had erected the storage building and, each winter, had a hand in cutting the ice to fill it. The large blocks of ice, each weighing as much as a heavy man, were stored in layers well insulated with sawdust from Parkman's mill. Since everyone

helped to cut and store the ice, all shared in its obvious benefits in hot weather.

Arthur's troubled mind flashed back to a winter when he had nearly lost his father during an ice harvest. Along with other valley men he and his father had been taking their turns at the annual job of cutting and floating the large blocks into a narrow lane of open water leading to a ramp where the heavy cakes of ice were removed from the water. The elder Saint-Pierre had lost his footing and fallen in. He had been wearing high boots and a heavy jacket, which made swimming extremely difficult. To make matters worse, when he rose to the surface he was under the ice field. Luckily there was enough air in his lungs to sustain him while he turned about until he could see the sunlight shining on the open water. By exerting all his superb strength, he managed to propel himself out from under the ice field, rose sputtering to the surface, and yelled for help. In mere seconds Arthur and another man rescued him and ran with him to the warmth of the trading post before his clothing could freeze in the near-zero temperature. Arthur still remembered his father's grin as he told Eli Farrar that he "never even got a sniffle" because of his unintentional swim in the icy river water.

It was not in Arthur's nature to give way completely to despair. Prompted by the familiar scene below, involuntary recollections of pleasanter times began coming to mind, helping to dispel some of his gloom.

Just north of the trading post stood a large building that served as both schoolhouse and community church meetinghouse. He could not count the times, in earlier days, when he had walked from school with Meg. They would stroll slowly down to the covered bridge where she would leave him and climb the west hill to her father's house on the heights overlooking the sawmill and mill yard. On Wednesday evenings, in more recent years, when the schoolhouse was used for prayer meetings, Meg would play the organ that had been donated by her father. The organ, like everything of Parkman's was expensive and had been presented to the community, cynics said, to prove that Winston Parkman was a pious man. Occasionally, on Sunday, Mrs. Fairbrother, the settlement schoolteacher, would do the playing to accompany Meg, whose lovely soprano did justice to any familiar

hymn she chose to sing. On Sunday afternoons, when the summer sun warmed the valley, Meg loved to walk with Arthur along the river trails. He recalled that she would sometimes seat herself at the river's edge and make him turn his back while she slipped off her shoes and stockings so she could dangle her small feet in the cool water. A wry smile came to his lips as he remembered how embarrassed she became when the wind once blew her skirt, allowing a momentary glimpse of dimpled knees. She needn't have been flustered, he thought. I've never been stupid enough to take advantge of our being alone together. She must believe I never would because she still goes walking with me—that is she did until a week ago. That thought was a reminder that Meg had apparently gone out of his life and his restive mood engulfed him once more.

As Arthur's restless glance took in the dimly seen houses he reflected that most of the men who owned them worked for Meg's wealthy father. Some exceptions were Eli Farrar's blacksmith shop and cabin and a public stable owned and operated by a bachelor named Tom Hanson. Parkman's mill employees lived in town, but the lumber camp workers, mostly French-Canadians, had set up what amounted to a racially segregated area by settling on land in the extreme north end of the valley, nearly two miles up the river. That's where Parkman probably wishes I would live, thought Arthur unhappily.

"Even that wouldn't satisfy him," he muttered. "He probably wishes I lived somewhere other than Wiggins Valley!"

There were few lights to be seen in the valley but, on the opposite heights, where Parkman's enormous mansion loomed against the darkened sky, there were lights showing at the ground floor windows. No light was visible at the upstairs window of Meg's room. Arthur was very familiar with the interior of that grandiose residence. Abigail Parkman had been fond of little Arthur and, until the year she fled the valley, she had allowed the children the run of the house whenever Parkman was working at the mill. After Abigail's disappearance, Arthur was rarely invited to visit Meg. A widow, Fidelia Gooch, had been employed to take over the care of the Parkman household. Fidelia was an ill-tempered martinet, a female reflection of her employer. Arthur soon learned that his association with Meg was not being encour-

aged. When Meg became eighteen she developed an independent attitude that her father deplored but saw no way to combat it effectively without becoming a jailer. That sort of treatment had not worked with his wife and he shied away from such measures with Meg. Arthur was allowed to visit the Parkman home on special occasions, usually when others of Meg's friends were present and always under the watchful eye of Mrs. Gooch. When Arthur finished his schooling and went to work with his father, he was out of touch with the valley nearly eight months out of the year. Arriving home after his second winter in the north woods, Arthur realized that his hunger for the sight of Meg was much more than a desire to renew an acquaintance with a friend. His adolescent admiration had become desire so consuming that he was hard put to conceal it from Meg and became uncharacteristically diffident in her presence. He had come to regard her as the loveliest, most desirable woman on earth. In his eyes no one else possessed such beautiful shoulder-length brown hair, such pretty hazel eyes, such a pert little nose, or such a winning smile, warm as a ray of sunshine. Meg was of medium height, rather slight of build, and moved with an easy stripling grace. Her virginal slenderness was a delight to behold. Arthur's arms would often ache to hold her, but something in her manner always gave him pause—something almost boyish in her demeanor. There was a directness about her, devoid of the flirtatious mannerisms of many girls her age. She had a way of looking at him with a searching frankness he found disconcerting because he was afraid she would discover the love he was at such pains to conceal. Lately, a subtle change in her attitude toward him was beginning to strengthen his belief that Meg Parkman was not for him. She was friendly, as always, but gradually a hint of aloofness had developed in her manner, as if she were making a deliberate effort to discourage any advances he might want to make. He wondered whether she had found him out and didn't like what she saw. He was gratified that she still rarely refused to go for a horseback ride or a stroll along the river trail. She had invited him to her twentieth birthday party in the spring of the previous year but there had been no moments alone with her. This year, he thought bitterly, I am probably not welcome under any circumstances. He wondered whether Meg knew that her father had forbidden

him to call on her and whether Meg had agreed to such an arbitrary order. He could not be certain until he had a chance to talk with her. Her failure to come to his father's funeral had shaken his faith in the strength of their friendship. Never had he been so painfully aware of the social gulf between them. He had told Eli that Meg would laugh in his face if he tried to make love to her.

"Oh, Meg," he whispered into the darkness, "what has happened to you? Why didn't you come today?"

After the manner of many another heart-sore young lover, Arthur lingered awhile with his melancholy thoughts and bemoaned the circumstances that were making a shambles of his existence.

At last, since he could do nothing constructive about his problem, he decided to sleep on it. Casting a final glance across the valley he reentered the cabin and went to bed. To his disgust, his bunk felt more like a rack than a place of rest and sleep eluded him until the early morning.

Chapter 4

At five o'clock, on the Monday morning following the week of his father's funeral, Arthur arose with some reluctance, unusual for him. For almost the first time in his life, he had not been sleeping well and regretted having promised to return to work. His cutting crew had finished work for the season late in March, and he had not expected to be called back to camp until the river drive started. On Sunday, a messenger from camp had brought word that nearly half of the sledge crews were down with stomach trouble, probably from eating spoiled pork. The drive could not begin until most of the felled trees had been trimmed and moved close to the skidways at the river's edge. What with much timber to be moved and half his sled crews too sick to work, the camp boss was worried and had asked Arthur and some other cutters to return and finish the trimming and sledding. Time was of the essence because the flooding Wiggins would soon begin to recede to ideal driving conditions.

As Arthur got ready to return to camp, his Monday morning

outlook was as gloomy as the leaden sky that threatened rain at any moment. He would much rather have stayed home until the business of Meg's disappearance could be resolved. In his present frame of mind he put the worst possible construction on her failure to show up at the funeral or at least send some word of condolence.

Arthur fed Rusty and went to the stable to feed his livestock: a cow, his father's horse, and his own Indian pony. While he was at camp, the care of the animals would be left to a youngster of the village. When the sleepy-eyed young caretaker arrived, Arthur shouldered a light pack and set out, on foot, up the north trail. Rusty, now too old to accompany his master, stood in the middle of the clearing and watched with sad eyes until Arthur disappeared around a bend in the trail.

The camp trail led along the rim of the valley for some three miles, at which point the terrain leveled out. For the next thirty miles, the Wiggins wound its way through valleys between heavily forested rolling hills. The trail followed along within sight of the river. Beyond the hilly country the land was almost flat but rose gradually for approximately another ten miles to the site of the lumber camp. The Hamilton Lumber Company, a Massachusetts-based outfit, owned the twenty-thousand-acre spread of excellent timber land in which the camp was located. The company reserved for itself only the white pine logs that were marked for ship masts. These were taken out of the river a few miles north of Wiggins Valley. The rest of the logs, under an agreement with Parkman, went down the river to be corralled in the millpond and eventually sawed into lumber for Parkman's customers.

Arthur traveled at a purposeful, quick stride. So absorbed was he in his somber reflections that the natural spring attractions of the forest were, for once, lost on him. Arthur loved the deep woods and usually reveled in the signs of new life everywhere about him. He passed through a stand of slender white birches, already well budded. Young conifers grew in profusion on both sides of the river. Fledgling pines, spruce, and fir vied with each other for space and the air was redolent with their perfume. In one spot, the trail passed through a stand of rare larches, their graceful branches bursting with buds. Farther up the trail a sugar

maple grove awaited the crew that would descend upon it, bore a hole in each trunk, and insert a wooden spile to draw off the faintly sweet sap to be boiled down into syrup. Here and there stood a solitary hemlock, prized for its bark. Yellow birches, beeches, poplars, and rock maples grew tall in the rich soil. Close beside the river wild cherry, chokecherry, and elderberry bushes grew in dense clumps bent nearly flat by the rampaging overflow. Fiddlehead ferns were beginning to poke their way up through the earth in cozy glades where the sun had warmed the ground. Windflowers, hepaticas, and trailing arbutus defied the still-frosty breath of spring and the still-lingering patches of snow. In numerous places the broad-bladed leaves of the Jack-in-the-pulpits, called swamp turnips by the Indians, were already bending protectively over their pulpits where "Jack" had yet to appear. Out on the flats, much of the terrain was marsh land covered with dense growths of cedar and common junipers that the lumberman called hackmatack. Cattails and alders grew around the borders of the marshy soil. The trail across the sodden flats was usually passable on foot but was now covered with water from the overflowing river, forcing Arthur to detour on higher ground. There were birds everywhere, wheeling, swooping, and scolding over the presence of the lone traveler. At one point, a partridge took the air mere inches from Arthur's feet, startling him with sudden whir of wings, a heartstopping sound that often catches a hunter off guard. Occasionally a deer, surprised by the silent-gaited wayfarer, stood for an instant with flared nostrils, then, with a flick of its white-lined tail, bounded away into the brush.

Under other circumstances, Arthur would have been looking forward eagerly to the start of the spring drive. An expert driver needed the agility of a monkey and the sure-footedness of a mountain goat if he would avoid being maimed or crushed to death at the caprice of the treacherously unpredictable heavy logs. The danger inherent in pitting his strength and nimbleness against a rushing river crowded with slippery unstable long timber always triggered a feeling of exhilaration that outstripped the stimulation Arthur had ever found in any other occupation. He, like river men of all generations, flirted with death cheerfully, day after day, until all the giant logs reached safe harbor within the booms on the placid surface of a millpond. The Wiggins had

its share of danger spots, one of which Arthur would always remember. It was at a narrows where an outcropping of granite ledge stretched halfway across the stream. The first year of Arthur's experience as a river man the drive had proceeded for several days with no jams or accidents. Suddenly the weather turned unseasonably cold. For four days the sky was overcast with a heavy cloud layer that obscured the sun. The melting snow packs at the headwaters of the Wiggins froze solid. Almost overnight the stream receded to summertime level. Despite efforts of the river hogs to prevent trouble the logs jammed, at the narrows, on the granite ledge over which the water no longer flowed. At once the grinding press of logs against the upstream edge of the outcropping forced a pileup, locked solidly in place by the tremendous weight of floating timber backed up by the jam. Heavy timbers, gathering speed from the rushing waters, slammed into the jam, forcing other logs into a tangled mass poised precariously on the top side of the ledge. "Hauling" a jam is life-threatening work, as every experienced river driver knows. Georges Michaux, the crew foreman, as was his custom, called for volunteers to break the jam. A burly driver named Boyer, an experienced hand with jams, insisted he could do the job by himself.

"Bah!" he said. "She is bébé! You watch—I fix damn quick!"

Boyer, cant-dog in hand, ran out onto the ledge. His experienced eye located quickly what seemed to be the key log. He set his swivel hook and strained backward with all his strength. As the log started to roll Boyer raced ashore to safety. The face of the jam settled slightly and seemed about to give way. Instead, after a few ominous creaks and groans, the logs atop the ledge remained jammed as solidly as before. Boyer, agile as a cat, ran back out onto the ledge. This time he was more deliberate in selecting a key log. When he found one he was too far from shore for safety if the tangled logs started to break loose. In spite of the danger he set his swivel hook and struggled in vain to move the log.

Arthur had been watching Boyer's efforts with intense interest. The other driver's failure to move the log provided the opening he had been waiting for.

"If it's experience I need, it's experience I'll get!" he muttered and, seizing his cant-dog, he raced out onto the ledge. In one

swift movement he set his swivel hook beside Boyer's. The startled older driver glared at him.

"You want get killed, enfant? You go back, *tout suite!*"

Arthur shook his head.

"Don't worry about me, Boyer. You aren't going to budge that log by yourself. Come on, let's break it loose! I can take care of myself."

Boyer studied Arthur's resolute expression for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"*A quoi bon!* You crazy—lak me!"

Turning to the dangerous business at hand, each grasped the handle of his cant-dog with both hands. In unison they strained backward in a powerful muscle-stretching effort that took full advantage of the leverage provided by the length of the cant-dog handles. Their swivel hooks bit deeply into the offending log and it began to roll out from under the tangle above. At once the jumble of heavy logs started to collapse and Arthur was forced to look to his own safety. He was dimly aware that Boyer had tripped and fallen backward into the stream, but to look behind him would have been suicidal. Logs were rolling at him down the surface of the ledge and he began climbing in desperate leaps up the face of the disintegrating jam. Afterwards he was to say that his performance was "like trying to climb a hill covered with lard!" Luckily, all the logs rolled away harmlessly beneath his nimble feet. After what seemed like an eternity, but what was really less than a minute, the threat of rolling logs was spent and Arthur stood free and trembling on the high side of the ledge. He stared downsteam and his heart sank. Boyer was nowhere in sight! And then, above the sound of the rapids, Arthur and the men lining the river bank heard a lusty yell. Arthur ran down to where the butt ends of several logs had lodged on the lower side of the outcropping and lay with their top ends half submerged in the water. In the sheltered space beneath the logs stood Boyer, up to his neck in the icy water. With great presence of mind, after his fall, he had ducked under a narrow shelf along the lower edge of the outcropping. The logs that could have crushed him to pulp had rumbled harmlessly over his protective shelf. He was helped out of the water, all the while swearing terrible oaths in Canuck patois, and found to be, miraculously, uninjured save in

pride.

The story of Boyer's narrow escape was repeated up and down the river country for days afterward. So too was the tale of Arthur Saint-Pierre's agile scramble up the face of a deadly broken jam. Thereafter, all rivermen paid him the respect accorded the few of their intrepid fraternity ever to have accomplished a similar feat. This they did by making a huge joke of the event every time it was mentioned, which was their way of showing Arthur that he had "arrived" as a river man. Arthur's remarkable agility came as no surprise to other river drivers who had known him since childhood. Almost every river man worth his salt strove to perfect some feat of agility to be demonstrated at the annual contest held on Wiggins Valley millpond after the drive was finished. Arthur had heard of a driver, working the Androscoggin River, who could perform an amazing stunt with a four-foot long log that had been cut to cordwood size. Arthur practiced for weeks until he could accomplish the same trick. He would step out onto a free-floating, four-foot log, twenty-four or more inches in diameter and buoyant enough to support his weight. Standing close to one end of the log he would bounce it up and down in the water until it was about to flip, end over end. At the last second, just before the log flipped over, Arthur would leap straight upward and land on the other side of the log as it settled back in the water. Whenever he performed the trick successfully only his boots got wet, but no one but Arthur knew how many times he had taken a ducking while practicing the stunt.

Meg Parkman always seemed to enjoy watching Arthur perform his trick on the short log, but when she learned of his dangerous experience with Boyer and the log jam her reaction was disappointing to Arthur. Flippancy from the river men he could understand, but Meg's casual comment he took as a rebuff.

"What in the world were you trying to do, commit suicide?" she had asked in a tone that sounded as if she were dealing with a foolhardy brother. Arthur chalked it up as another indication that Meg's regard for him was, as always, merely sisterly.

When Arthur took himself and his sour mood into camp at dusk it was to find that few of the ailing workers had recovered enough to go back to work.

"Unless these sour bellies get on their feet in a hurry," said

the camp boss, "we're going to be way behind schedule. Much obliged for coming, Arthur. Damned shame about your father."

The Saint-Pierres had always enjoyed the reputation of being one of the best cutting crews in the territory. Edouard Saint-Pierre, as head chopper, had never been known to miss felling a tree within inches of where he wanted it to land. A cutting crew consisted of three men: a head chopper, a second chopper, and a sledtender. All cutting was accomplished with single-bitted poleaxes. A hundred years would pass before the cross-cut saw would become the preferred tool of any Wesserunsett cutting crew. Arthur had served his father as second chopper and in a remarkably short time had become skillful enough to be a head chopper with a crew of his own.

That evening Arthur sat on the edge of his bunk while applying a warmed oil and tallow mixture to the uppers of the heavy caulked boots he would wear during the drive. Applied frequently, the oily mixture preserved the leather and helped to keep it from cracking from the effects of immersion in the icy river water. Across the room old Charlie Kingdon, a humble swamper, sat smoking his corn cob pipe and spinning tales of his experiences in earlier days. A swamper was usually assigned that job because he was either an inexperienced hand or an older man whose age or an accident had brought him down to a less demanding level of activity. Swampers trimmed felled trees and cleared away the trimmings and brush to make way for the teamsters. Teamsters and swampers served any crew that had downed timber. Charlie Kingdon had once been a river driver, one of the best to hear him tell it. And telling it he was, that evening, to a couple of first-year choppers. Old Charlie often colored his stories a bit when telling of his former prowess, but nobody cared. Everybody liked the old man—everybody, that is, except an ill-tempered teamster named McKelvy, who was a rum-soak and a bully and didn't like anybody. In most lumber camps no sled-tender with a grain of sense cared to work with a teamster he didn't know well. If a tender decided to turn the heavy sledge by hand and the teamster had a grudge against him, a crafty teamster, by easing the horses ahead too soon, could put the sled tender out of commission with a strained back. McKelvy had been guilty of just such sadistic behavior and few tenders

cared to work with him. He was a half-breed Indian who ought never to drink but did, too often and too much. The men had nicknamed him "The Ape," which animal he resembled in some respects. He was short and stocky with massive shoulders, long arms, and big hands that could grip like a vise. A morose man at best, his belligerence and bully-ragging tendencies always multiplied in direct proportion to the amount of rum he consumed. By ill chance, that evening, while old Charlie was reminiscing, McKelvy, reeking of rum, strode into the bunkroom. For a few minutes, with a sneer on his face, he stood by Charlie's chair. McKelvy was looking for trouble and the old swamper was a convenient target.

"Why don't you give up, old man?" he said, interrupting Charlie in midsentence. "Nobody believes them lies anyway."

Kingdon, in addition to disliking McKelvy, looked upon him with actual contempt. Charlie Kingdon had been an excellent river driver, whereas McKelvy had always been a troublemaker, often too drunk to handle his horses.

"Why don't you mind your own business, McKelvy!" said Charlie defiantly. "I wasn't talking to you!"

"Don't give me none of your lip, swamper!" snarled McKelvy. "You ain't man enough to back it up!"

With that, McKelvy seized old Charlie by his wrists and jerked him out of his chair. Exerting his superior strength he twisted the old man's wrists inward with such cruel force that it appeared to be his intention to dislocate Charlie's elbows. His face contorted with pain and helpless anger the old man struggled in vain to free his wrists from McKelvy's viselike grip but his aging muscles were clearly not equal to the task. His corncob pipe fell from his mouth and he swore at his tormentor with the choicest swearwords he could recall. The teamster laughed uproariously and began forcing old Charlie to his knees.

Suddenly McKelvy's face began to turn red and he struggled for breath. Arthur, aghast at the teamster's sadistic behavior, had bounded silently across the room in his stockinged feet. Slipping quickly behind the big man, he had encircled his neck with a brawny arm. With his forearm against the teamster's Adam's apple he had applied such murderous pressure that McKelvy was forced to look to his own welfare. As soon as the teamster released

Charlie's wrists Arthur dragged the gasping bully into the middle of the room and administered a healthy kick that sent McKelvy sprawling face down on the bunk-room floor. No one in camp had ever seen Arthur so furious. His face was pale to the lips and his dark eyes blazed with anger.

"McKelvy," he said in a voice raspy with passion, "we've had enough of you! Behave yourself or find another place to bunk!"

McKelvy rolled over and sat up. Momentarily dazed, he shook his head to clear his vision. Realizing how ridiculous he had been made to look he scrambled angrily to his feet and, mouthing obscenities, glared at Arthur.

"You sanctimonious bastard!" "Who the hell made you the boss around here! I'll teach you to lay hands on me!"

No one had ever been able to convince McKelvy that Arthur's usual easygoing manner was not a sign of timidity. His big hands clenched into hammerlike fists, the hulking teamster charged at Arthur with all the finesse of a maddened bull. With cool and deadly efficiency Arthur sidestepped nimbly and rammed his fist with devastating effect into McKelvy's midsection. Fighting for breath the gasping teamster recovered and lunged at Arthur again. Determined to make short work of the affair Arthur put all his considerable strength into a pistonlike blow that snapped McKelvy's head sidewise and knocked him senseless. The teamster went down, as if poleaxed, once more prone on the floor. In ominous icy silence Arthur went to his bunk, slipped on his caulked boots, and proceeded to walk up the backs of McKelvy's legs. It would be many days before the punctures, inflicted by the sixty-three sharp spikes in the sole of each boot, would be sufficiently healed to cease reminding McKelvy of the humiliating chastisement he had suffered at the hands of a man he outweighed by seventy pounds. Such punishment was far from unknown in lumber camp brawls, but the men watching Arthur's application of it sucked in their breaths in amazement at his unusual behavior. Grinning in tacit approval of the teamster's comeuppance, four of the men picked up the unconscious bully, took him to the stable, and dumped him into an empty stall.

The following morning, a delegation went to the camp boss to get McKelvy fired, only to find that the teamster had already left. Apparently he had realized that life would be unbearable

after the beating he had received from the most popular man in camp. No one ever saw him in the area again and nobody mourned his absence. The camp boss warned Arthur against assuming he had seen the last of McKelvy.

"Watch out for that one, Arthur!" he said. "He left here swearing he would kill you if he ever saw you again! I wouldn't take that threat too lightly if I were you!"

After his temper cooled Arthur was stricken with a fit of contrition, not because he had administered a harsh lesson to McKelvy, but because he had lost so completely his self-control. It was out of character for him to have behaved in such a manner. Condemnation for his actions, he was assured, was entirely self-inflicted. The crew, to a man, approved heartily of what he had done; especially old Charlie Kingdon whose wrists were injured. McKelvy had twisted the old man's wrists so cruelly that the skin was broken and bleeding, and his arms were lame for days afterward.

Privately, Arthur blamed his loss of control on the dark mood that had possessed him all that first day. His chastisement at Parkman's hands, his father's death, Meg's ominous absence, weariness from loss of sleep, the long trek to camp—all had contributed to his departure from sanity, as he termed it. He had had enough of people with bad tempers and hoped that the McKelvy incident would not saddle him with a reputation for having an uncontrollable passion. In the days that followed, hard physical labor did much to overcome his dissatisfaction with himself. On Monday, the third of May, upon his return home, the desire uppermost in his mind was to learn the reason for Meg's disappearance. It seemed incredible that she would have stayed away from his father's funeral unless Parkman had ordered her to do so and even then he found it hard to believe that Meg would obey such an order. That she was not yet twenty-one would serve as an excuse for Parkman's insistence on filial piety. Not that he needed an excuse. In Winston Parkman's lexicon, the words "obedient" and "daughter" always appeared together. He was an extreme example of the tyrannical parent who believed that obedience without question was a cardinal virtue required of all children until they were at least old enough to sign a legal contract. Valley people had long since learned that in Parkman's

view wives had few rights and dependent children even less.

That night there was a light in Meg's room.

"Somehow, some way, I will see her, father or no father!" Arthur told himself.

Chapter 5

William, Prince of Orange, and his consort, Mary, became joint sovereigns of England in 1688, following the flight of King James to France. Three years later, the Province of Massachusetts Bay in the New World was created by royal charter. William of Orange, never popular with his subjects, managed Parliament by bribing certain members to do his bidding. Reginald Parkman, a wealthy Liverpool industrialist and personal friend of the king, was, among others, a generous contributor to the undercover machinations that kept William on the throne. Reginald, intrigued by the possibility of enlarging his sphere of influence, emigrated to the New World and became a power in the administration of the Massachusetts colony. His only son, Montgomery, became increasingly displeased over the severe restrictions under which the colonists were forced to live. He saw little to choose between the religious intolerance that the New World immigrants had left behind in England and the rigid puritanical codes of behavior, enforced by unnecessarily drastic punishments for nonconformity, insisted upon by the leaders of the colony.

Upon the death of his parents, "Monty" Parkman fell heir to a fortune that enabled him to indulge in some pioneering of his own. A gentleman born, he disdained the life of ease that his wealth and influence could have assured him. Instead, he burned with a restless desire to seek new and greener fields where he hoped to establish a settlement free from the ironclad restrictions in the Massachusetts colony. To the dismay of his patrician friends, he fell in love with a buxom, apple-cheeked young woman who had come to the colony as a bond servant. He purchased her bond, dissolved it by marrying her, and together they recruited a group of other dissenters who were eager to be a part of Monty's projected expedition into northern New England.

Early in the eighteenth century Monty and his little band of

intrepid pioneers discovered and fell in love with the lush valley that became their new home. A local French trapper told Monty that the river flowing through the valley was called the "Weegans," after an earlier settler who, along with his entire family, had not survived an Indian massacre. The newcomers learned later that the victim's name had actually been Wiggins and thereafter used that name to designate both the river and their settlement.

Wiggins had attempted to build a sawmill but never finished it. The Indians, after slaughtering the family, had set fire to the partially finished mill. The charred stumps of its timbers lay scattered about in the undergrowth on the west bank of the river when Monty and his friends arrived in the valley. The sawmill site chosen by his predecessor was ideal and Monty, with the help of his followers, erected his mill on the same spot. The youthful and exuberant pioneers lost no time in clearing land, erecting their cabins, planting gardens, and settling down to an existence that, if somewhat hazardous, was peaceful, productive, and free from the hateful restrictions they had left behind.

The Province of Massachusetts Bay embraced, among other regions, the territory of Maine into which Monty and his followers had ventured. The right to govern the Province had been granted to Massachusetts, but the right to the soil east of the Kennebec River remained in the crown of England. Monty capitalized on the reputation and influence of his illustrious father and obtained crown grants to the lands that he and his friends had found desirable. Thus the Wiggins Valley pioneers became the beneficiaries of royal grants that gave them and their descendants undisputed titles to their properties all through the early part of the century until the end of the Revolutionary War.

Monty's sawmill enterprise was a success from the start. Milled lumber was in demand throughout the territory, as more and more families traveled up both sides of the Kennebec and sought home sites among the rolling hills or near the innumerable lakes and streams scattered over the entire region of upper New England.

Monty and his wife lived in a modest cabin little larger than any other in the valley and there their two sons, Charles and Winston, were born. Charles, three years older than his brother,

was frail as a lad and inclined to sedentary pursuits. When old enough, he served his father as keeper of accounts for the business. Winston, energetic and headstrong, fancied himself as a leader of men and eventually persuaded Monty to put him in charge of the sawmill operation. Production increased under his management but he was disliked heartily by every member of the crew, a circumstance of little or no concern to Winston.

Monty and his wife died within a few days of each other, leaving the sons joint heirs to a prosperous business and considerable accumulated wealth. Charles, who cared little for the rural life, sold his share in the mill to Winston, moved to Norridgewock, and married into a wealthy family. Never in the best of health, he died when his only daughter, Sybil, was six years old. Winston, meanwhile, had married Abigail, a valley girl, and set about to enlarge the holdings his father had left him.

Winston Parkman, early in his adult life, emerged as a man who loved to flaunt his wealth, little of which had been earned through his own efforts. In marked contrast to his gentlemanly parent, Winston reveled in the impression he was able to make on the humble folk of the valley by an ostentatious display of his purchasing power. He relished acquiring the rarest, the largest, or the most ornate of possessions and he appeared to thrive on the knowledge that he was the wealthiest and most influential man in the settlement. Soon after his parents died and his brother had left the valley, he dismantled the cabin in which he had been born and replaced it with an attractive two-and-half-story mansion, tastefully filigreed, and surrounded by well-tended lawns. Lilac and honeysuckle bushes were imported from Massachusetts and graced the grounds around the Parkman residence long before anyone else in the valley could afford such expensive attractions. Attached to the rear of the main building were two one-story ells, one of which contained a large kitchen, a pantry, and a tank room for cooling milk. The other was Parkman's private office and library. A short distance behind the living quarters stood a huge barn and other outbuildings, with corrals for the livestock that included a number of fine horses. West of the barn was an extensive garden area and beyond that some forty acres of cleared pasture land. All buildings were sheathed with white clapboard siding. Doors, windows, and shutters were

trimmed in green. Two double-vented brick chimneys protruded from the roof of the main house, providing stacks for the four fireplaces within the building, two on the ground floor and two in second-story bedrooms. The high-pitched roofs of all the structures were shingled with the finest of cedar shakes. An iron grillwork fence surrounded the front lawn. In the rustic setting of Wiggins Valley, the Parkman estate was pretentious and suggestive of its owner's character. It was as if a king had built his castle among hovels. Given to haggling over ordinary living expenses, Parkman willingly expended large sums on material things visible to the public eye. There were no apple orchards in the territory until the 1780's. Winston hastened to be the first to plant one—an imposing spread of two hundred trees and the only one in the valley for many years.

The Parkman sawmill had been in profitable operation for over seventy years when, in 1787, word had come to Winston that an inventor in England had perfected a new, efficient circular saw blade which, according to its developer, was to revolutionize the lumber industry. For years the production capacity of the mill had been provided by a gang assembly of three time-honored whipsaw blades that were connected to a drive shaft powered by a large undershot waterwheel at the west end of the Wiggins millpond dam. Winston had been considering ways to increase the mill's production and welcomed the news of the advantages of the revolutionary circular saw blade. In spite of the exorbitant cost, Parkman bought and had shipped from England not one, but two of the new blades. Problems developed when installation of one of the blades proved to be an unexpectedly difficult task. The saw shaft did not rotate rapidly enough when attached directly to the waterwheel. It became necessary to improvise a gear assembly that would step up the speed of the saw enough to keep it from stalling when it bit into a log. The improvisation was consuming many more hours of labor than Parkman had counted on. There was little time to waste if lumber contract commitments were to be met on schedule. The flooding Wiggins would soon be carrying timber to rendezvous in the millpond. As days passed and difficulties kept piling up, Parkman's temper flared often, making life miserable for his men.

At four o'clock on the afternoon of the day of Arthur's return

from camp, Parkman was in one of his evil moods. It had been discovered that the bolts needed to secure his new saw blade shaft bearings were the wrong size and two of the upper halves of the bearings were cracked and useless. Confronted with these additional problems, Parkman fell to cursing in frustration and departed for home in angry haste.

Another irritation awaited Parkman at home. His daughter, Margaret, had just returned from a visit with her cousin, Sybil, in Norridgewock. Parkman had contrived the visit and had expected Margaret to stay away for at least a month but she had been gone less than three weeks. Upon her return, she had learned from Mrs. Gooch of her father's confrontation with Arthur when he had come to call on her and of the death of his father on the following day. Her father's peremptory dismissal of her friend aroused her resentment and anger she could not contain. Her face drained of color she faced her father resolutely.

"Mrs. Gooch told me you ordered Arthur off the place when he came to see me the day before his father died! What did you expect that to accomplish! No wonder you wanted me out of the way! And suggesting that I stay at Sybil's for a month! I had my fill of her tiresome friends in much less time than that!"

Parkman's answer avoided the issue.

"You would do well, my girl, to cultivate the society of Sybil's friends. They come from families of some substance."

Margaret was not to be diverted. She stamped her foot angrily.

"Will you tell me why you ordered Arthur off the place and told him to stay away from me!"

Parkman's patience, sorely tried by the day's events was easily exhausted.

"Margaret Parkman, you are being disrespectful and I will not tolerate it! I owe you no explanation for anything I do—none whatsoever! But, since you ask, I ordered that half-breed to stay away because you are obviously becoming infatuated with an ill-mannered clod who doesn't know his place! I do not wish to have him in this house, ever again! This is my house, in case you have forgotten!"

Margaret, no whit abashed, replied angrily, "Yes, father, I am well aware that this is your house! No one is ever allowed to forget it! And your land, and your sawmill, and your timber,

and everything else you could get your hands on! But you don't own Arthur! An ill-mannered, clod, is he? You have no idea how well mannered he is, compared to some of Sybil's lecherous men friends who think that the world and women exist for their benefit alone! What makes you think I won't see Arthur whenever I wish? All you have accomplished is to make me ashamed that I wasn't here to be with him at his father's funeral. What must he think of me! I shall certainly see that he knows why I was gone!"

Parkman's anger boiled over. A tall, extremely thin man, he wore a goatee that partially concealed his weak chin but failed to hide the swollen veins in his neck—veins that stood out like those of a man in the grip of an apoplectic seizure. Shaking with rage, he pointed a long, thin finger at Margaret.

"You insolent baggage! You will do what I tell you! Do you understand that? You will do what I consider proper behavior in a daughter of mine! I will not have you carrying on with that half-breed!"

Margaret was on the verge of tears but not yet intimidated.

"Carrying on! What a thing to say! Arthur is a gentleman—more of a gentleman than any other man I know! I will—."

Parkman advanced suddenly and, seizing Margaret's shoulder, spun her around to face the stairway.

"I'll tell you what you will do, you hussy! You will go to your room, right now! And don't come down until you get it through your head that you are not yet your own mistress, nor will be as long as you live in this house! You're just like your mother! Now get up stairs before I forget myself and tell you why!"

Parkman, greyfaced in his uncontrolled anger, was a terrifying sight, as one who had taken leave of his senses. Margaret shrank away from the painful clutch of his hand. At the foot of the stairs she paused and stared in sudden alarm at a father she had never seen before, so changed was he by his violent wrath. Seldom had Margaret experienced fear of physical harm but, at that moment, disaster seemed to be staring at her out of Parkman's glittering eyes. Her brief rebellion gave way to dismay and she fled up the stairs in fearful haste.

Once inside her room, with trembling fingers Margaret slid the bolt on her bedroom door and leaned back against the panels while she struggled for control over her agitation. She was shaking

in every limb and breathing in labored gasps. All at once the enormity of the thing that had happened for the first time in her life assailed her senses and, flinging herself prone upon her bed, she fell to sobbing in mingled fear and frustration.

Some time later the housekeeper, aware that her report had precipitated the quarrel, knocked timorously at Margaret's door.

"Margaret, there's supper waiting, if you want something to eat. Your father went down to the trading post and probably won't be back for an hour or so."

"Please don't bother, Mrs. Gooch. I don't feel like eating anything."

Margaret arose and was immediately aware of an unaccustomed weariness. Her shuddering paroxysm of weeping had drained her strength and left her deeply troubled over her father's frighteningly violent anger. From a pitcher on her bedside commode, she poured cool water into a washbowl, moistened a washcloth, and held the refreshing coolness against her eyelids and tear-stained cheeks. Aware of the deepening twilight she lighted the candles in her elegant candelabrum, a gift from her father in happier days. Seated at a small ormolu-encrusted writing desk, she opened her leather-bound diary. Taking up a feathered pen, she set down the date and then fell to staring at the otherwise empty page. How to describe the confrontation with her father! One of his bitter remarks had been delivered like a slap in the face. "You're just like your mother," he had said. What could have happened between her parents that had prompted him to say those words in such a caustic tone, as if both she and her mother had committed some terrible sin? It was the first time since her childhood that he had referred directly to his wife. She remembered her unhappy fifth birthday, just two weeks after her mother drowned in the Kennebec River. Thereafter, her mother's name had never been mentioned in her presence. She had grown up with the memory of a soft-spoken, pretty woman who seldom found time for anything save housework. Her father's accusatory remark certainly needed explanation, but at the moment she was more deeply concerned over his reference to her relationship with Arthur. "Carrying on," he had called it. Was he actually accusing her of lewd behavior? The thought brought an angry blush to her cheeks. There had never been anything even remotely indiscreet in her relationship with Arthur. Why was her father suggesting, suddenly, that there was something vulgar about it? She was beginning to realize that her anger had been aroused more for Arthur's sake than for her own. Her father's attitude was compelling her to consider the association with her lifelong friend in a different light. Her friendship with Arthur had always been uncomplicated and pleasant. The horseback rides, the long walks, and the exchanges of ideas and philosophies she had always regarded as being among the nicer experiences of her life, requiring neither excuse nor explanation. Now she was being told by her father that Arthur was an undesirable character, a "half-breed," not worthy of her. All her instincts told her that such an assessment was untrue and unfair. Dear shy Arthur, who always treated her with respect and a gentleness not always found in strong, virile men. She knew her friend to be well read, intelligent, and well mannered. He always compared favorably with any other man she knew and much better than some. She could think of no person, save only her father, who did not respect Arthur as a hard-working, decent man. Tears came to her eyes at the thought of him alone in grief over his father's sudden death. Again she felt acute distress because she had not been at his side at such a time. Worst of all, her father had driven him from their door on the day before his father died! How crushed he must have felt! Those were Margaret's thoughts as she sat staring forlornly through her tears at the empty page of her diary.

When she retired that night, Margaret lay for hours, staring into the darkness and feeling more miserable than at any time in memory. Her hitherto tranquil world had been rudely upset by her father's unreasonable attitude and her reaction to it. She asked herself why she had bristled so violently over the suggestion that Arthur was not a fit person to have as a friend—over the thinly veiled implication that he might even be a threat to her chastity. She had surprised herself by the intensity of her anger—anger that had driven her to stand up to her father as she had never done before. The more she thought about it the more clearly she saw that she had actually been fearful that her father was attempting to take something away from her that she had come to prize—trying to take away her companionship with someone dearer to her than she had ever admitted to herself. Her father's

assumption that she was "carrying on" with Arthur had exasperated her because it was untrue, and yet, perversely, she found herself wishing that there had been some substance to the accusation. The thought that she might be the target of Arthur's amorous attentions was strangely exciting, but it was merely a fantasy. Arthur had never given her reason to believe that he loved her as a man loves a woman he hopes to marry. He had never, in truth, indicated that he loved her at all. If he had ever cherished thoughts of a relationship more intimate than mere friendship there had never been any evidence of such a desire. Her limited experience had led her to believe most men incapable of restraint. Some of Sybil's men friends had made their wants all too clear. Surely if Arthur loved her she would have been able to recognize the signs. In her honest heart she never considered the possibility that Arthur looked upon himself as her social inferior and had placed an iron restraint on his emotions because he feared that a declaration would distress her and spell the end of their friendship.

Margaret was unable to fall asleep until long after midnight. Over and over, she told herself that in spite of anything her father might say or do she would never relinquish her right to see Arthur wherever and whenever she chose to do so. Arthur might not love her but she knew now that she loved him. She took a perverse satisfaction in knowing that her father, by his actions, had forced her to evaluate and recognize her true feelings and admit that she was in love with the man she had known most of her life. How dismayed her father would be if he knew!

When at last, from emotional and physical exhaustion, Margaret fell asleep, her last thought was to find a way to see Arthur and let him know she had not forsaken him. Beyond that she dared not speculate.

Chapter 6

Early in the morning after his return from camp, Arthur awoke torn between anticipation and apprehensions. He made ready for a trip to Norridgewock, a trip that would serve two purposes—one, to order his father's headstone and two, provide a possible opportunity of seeing Meg. He would be riding past the Parkman

residence and felt certain that the woman he loved would be up and about—a not unreasonable assumption. The Parkman household was usually astir at daybreak. In the past, he and Meg had often exercised their horses on early morning canters together. Was this pleasurable practice now to be denied him? He wondered. He wanted desperately to learn the answer to that and especially the reason for Meg's failure to get in touch with him at a time when her presence would have been so helpful and reassuring.

The Saint-Pierres owned two riding horses: one, a high-strung Arabian mare; the other, a white-faced sorrel Indian pony. Arthur's father had purchased the Arabian, said to have been the foal of a purebred mare belonging to an officer in the Seventeenth English Light Dragoons, one of the two units of British cavalry engaged in the Revolutionary uprising. Much as Arthur admired the Arabian he never rode her. Nor did he care for the English saddle his father had always used. In his opinion saddles, stirrups, and bits were nonessentials and the only equipment required was a good quality bridle without the cruel bit. Accordingly the sorrel's bridle was made of rawhide only and Arthur rode bareback, after the manner of his childhood Indian companions. Typical of Indian horses, called ponies because they were generally smaller than imported horses, Arthur's sorrel was a sturdy animal noted for endurance on the trail. In keeping with his penchant for giving names to all his animals Arthur called the sorrel "Petit-Brun," the English equivalent being "Little-Brown," an apt description of the gentle pony.

It was a beautiful day. The sun shone brilliantly in a cloudless sky when Arthur, astride Petit-Brun, rode down the steep slope to the valley floor.

"You're getting too fat, boy," he said to the pony. "If I don't exercise you more I'll have to begin calling you "Gros" instead of "Petit."

As Arthur crossed the covered bridge and began to ascend the western slope, he could hear sounds of activity coming from Parkman's sawmill. Everyone in the settlement was aware that Parkman was pushing his men hard, from daybreak to dark, trying to finish the difficult task of installing his newfangled saw blade before the spring drive started. The town buzzed with

stories about Parkman's temper tantrums. One of his long-suffering men finally decided he could no longer endure the abusive language, loaded his possessions into a hayrack, and, with his wife and baby, moved out of the settlement, Parkman would very likely like nothing better than for me to move away also, mused Arthur. Speculation upon that point was driven from his mind as he reached the brow of the hill and the front of the Parkman mansion came into view. His eyes sought the windows of Meg's bedchamber. The curtains were closed, much to his chagrin. Meg must still be abed. He could have confirmed that reasoning easily by enquiring at the front door, but it was not his intention to defy Parkman's orders and risk causing trouble for Meg. Adding to his disappointment was the nagging thought that if Meg really wanted to see him she would find a way. Reluctantly he rode slowly past the south side of the house. There was no sign of Meg, but he saw Mrs. Gooch peering at him from a kitchen window. Frustration and irritation were evident in his abrupt urging of the pony to a gallop.

Arthur was not to know that Margaret had been awake. Hearing the sound of galloping hooves she jumped out of bed and, running to the south window, parted the curtains just in time to recognize Arthur before he disappeared around a bend in the road. Biting her lip in vexation over having missed him, she berated herself for not having been up and dressed at her usual early hour. In the past Arthur had never ridden past the house without stopping and her heart sank at the realization that he probably believed he was no longer welcome. As matters stood, who could blame him? Her first impulse was to dress quickly and ride out after him but, upon considering the possible consequences, she abandoned that idea.

"Better not do that," she murmured. "Gooch would be sure to guess what I was about and tell my father. I must think of another way."

Margaret continued to be plagued by the conviction that her absence at a crucial time in Arthur's life must have hurt him deeply. Might he not have taken it as a rejection of their friendship? Perhaps he even believed her to be in sympathy with her father's treatment of him. He certainly had a right to expect her to make her position clear and she had not been able to do

that. With such thoughts agitating her mind she was conscious of a sudden compelling sense of urgency. She must see him—she must! First of all, she must explain her absence and then she must look into his eyes and discover, if she could, the depth of his regard for her. That was all important now that she had finally recognized her attraction to Arthur for what it really was.

"Oh Arthur!" she whispered. "How could I have been so blind?"

Margaret was to recall later how she, barefooted and in her nightshift, stood in the middle of her chilly bedchamber that morning and weighed possible courses of action. She was very much her mother's daughter in certain characteristics, but years of living with her taciturn father had bred in her an independence of thought and action. She had learned to face problems with benefit of little or no advice from anyone. Wasting little time in indecision she dressed quickly, raced downstairs, and, forgetting about breakfast, ran out to the stables. She had decided to throw caution to the winds and ride out after Arthur. Her father was at the mill and would not be likely to return home until evening. She felt the weight of his heavy hand, however, when she discovered that all of the horses were gone. One of the hired men was cleaning the stalls. He told her that her father had instructed him to turn all the animals out to pasture—something that had never been done before so early in the season.

Margaret stamped her foot in vexation.

"Out to pasture! I don't see any horses in the pasture! Look there! The pasture is empty! I want my mare! Where is she?"

The stableman was apologetic and obviously embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, Miss Margaret. I turned the horses out like your father told me to. I don't know where they went. You know how frisky they are when they're first turned loose. Maybe they ran off over behind the knoll."

Margaret had little faith in the stableman's explanation. She ran all the way to the top of the knoll, which obstructed the view of the north end of the pasture. As she expected, there were no horses in sight. From where she stood, across to the dense forest bordering the north and west sides of pasture, there was nothing in sight save a barren expanse of withered, brown grass. Margaret stared in dismay at the bleak meadow and pursed her lips in indignation. Apparently this was her father's way of serving

notice that her movements were to be restricted. Removal of the horses seemed a spiteful, infantile thing to do, but it had the immediate effect of frustrating her intention of trying to overtake Arthur on the Norridgewock road. She wondered what other maneuvers her father might be planning to bend her to his will. Surely he did not believe he would be successful in preventing her from seeing Arthur from this time on—such an idea was too absurd! Until yesterday, the prospect of engaging in a battle of wits with her domineering father would have been unthinkable—but not now. Her attitudes toward her father and, most of all, toward Arthur had undergone remarkable changes. Her father's abusive unreasonableness had honed rather than dulled the Parkman steel within her. She would see Arthur! She would! More than ever she was determined to have her chance to explain and make Arthur understand that she had not abandoned him suddenly.

There was a chill in the morning air. She walked rapidly, the tips of her riding boots flashing angrily beneath the hem of her ground-length woolen skirt. In neither her stylish, lively appearance nor in her rapid purposeful stride was there anything of the subdued young woman who had fled her father's angry presence on the previous evening. Parkman would have been chagrined if he could, at that moment, have evaluated correctly the angry look in her eyes and the determined set of her jaw, so like his own when aroused. Most of all, he would have been dismayed to learn that his own behavior had been the means of kindling his daughter's love for the "half-breed" he despised.

Margaret retired to her room and sat by the south window until noon. When Arthur failed to appear she concluded that he had gone on another of his occasional trips to Norridgewock. From experience she knew that on such trips he seldom returned until late afternoon—an ideal situation for what she now planned to do.

After the noon meal, Margaret went to the kitchen and began preparing a basket of food.

"Where are you off to now?" asked the housekeeper sourly.

"This is for Mrs. Davidson, as usual," replied Margaret. "I don't suppose anyone visited her while I was gone."

"I certainly didn't," said Mrs. Gooch. "I have enough to do

without traipsing over to Davidson's place. Pity that no good husband of hers wouldn't get a steady job and hire someone to look after her."

The Davidsons lived approximately two miles west of the Parkman property. Rafe Davidson was a shiftless, irresponsible husband, convinced that the settlement was no fit place for a man of his intelligence. Rafe fancied himself to be an inventor and dreamed of the day the world would recognize his genius. The difficulty was that his mind, often befuddled with rum, had never conceived an idea that could be translated into anything practical. At first, he blamed his lack of success on the necessity of spending so much of his time in earning a living that he was unable to give free rein to his inventive turn of mind. Later, when failing health had turned his wife into an invalid who required care and expensive tonics, Rafe told everyone who would listen that he had decided to subordinate his potential to pressures for survival and the care of his dear wife. Even in his role of martyr Rafe was a most unlikely figure who used his martyrdom as an excuse for being lazier than ever.

Margaret had fallen into the habit of visiting Mrs. Davidson at regular intervals and always took along a basket of food: a loaf of freshly baked bread and a jar of preserves or butter and eggs. Margaret suspected, rightly, that her father had asked Mrs. Gooch to keep track of her movements and report to him if there was reason to think she was trying to arrange a clandestine meeting with Arthur. Since Margaret's errand of mercy was a well-established custom, there was no reason for the housekeeper to think that this particular visit was prompted by anything other than concern for Mrs. Davidson's welfare. What Margaret did not know was that Mrs. Gooch had seen Arthur ride by that morning and had already guessed Margaret's real motive for the Davidson visit. Another thing Margaret did not know, and would have been amazed to learn, was that the housekeeper had come to hope that Margaret and Arthur would make a match of it. She had convinced herself that if the young people were to defy Parkman and elope, Margaret would probably be disinherited. There was no one else likely to benefit from her employer's wealth. His only living relatives were his widowed sister-in-law and her daughter, Sybil, and they were even wealthier than Parkman

himself. It therefore seemed logical to the mercenary Fidelia Gooch that she, his faithful housekeeper for many years, would have a more than even chance of getting her hands on a generous slice of Winston Parkman's wordly goods. The housekeeper, younger than Parkman, was by no means an ugly woman and had already begun, in subtle ways, to make the most of her proximity to a lonely widower.

Margaret always walked to the Davidsons whenever the weather was pleasant. Always well groomed, on this occasion she was unusually conscious of her appearance. She had never before been especially concerned with how she would look to Arthur but circumstances were different now—much different. She wore sturdy walking boots, her long grey woolen skirt topped by a modest white high-necked shirtwaist, her fur-trimmed grey cape, and her tam o'shanter with its bright red pompon. In defiance of custom, she had chosen not to wear her hair up but allowed her brown tresses to hang free and unbraided. With the bloom of excellent health in her cheeks, Margaret was an attractive sight as she strode purposefully on her way. Tom Hanson, the public stable owner, riding back from Norridgewock, waved to her as he passed and would say later that Margaret Parkman was a mighty pretty girl.

Mrs. Davidson was, as usual, delighted to see Margaret. She enjoyed her visitor's recitation of details of her stay with her cousin Sybil. The glamorous existence of the favored in Norridgewock's society was something that Rafe Davidson's invalid wife would never enjoy except vicariously. Margaret was at pains to present her visit in its best light, while in her heart she was bitterly disappointed over the events that had taken place while she was away. She could not forget that while she was spending almost three weeks in the company of tiresome, snobbish young people who seemed to have little serious purpose in life, Arthur was facing his sorrow alone.

As the afternoon wore on, Mrs. Davidson could not ignore the fact that her visitor became increasingly preoccupied and, at intervals, stared intently out the window. Finally she said, "My dear, you seem to be watching for someone."

Margaret felt color rising in her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Davidson. I don't mean to be rude, but I am

expecting Arthur Saint-Pierre to be riding past here soon, on his way home. I have a message for him and hope to catch his eye before he goes dashing by."

"Oh yes, I understand. He rode past here early this morning. Such a nice young man. I was sorry to hear about his father's sudden passing. It must have been a terrible shock. I suppose you went to the funeral."

Margaret turned her head away quickly, her eyes suddenly bright with unshed tears.

"No, I am sorry to say," replied Margaret in a carefully controlled voice. "I was at Sybil's when Mister Saint-Pierre died. I felt badly about being away at such a time. Arthur and I have been friends since we were very young."

Margaret prolonged her visit until late afternoon, but there was no sign of Arthur. With over two miles to walk, unless she were to leave soon she would face a lecture from Mrs. Gooch about being late for supper and, worse, the angry disapproval of her father. Vexed that her plan had failed, she finally bade Mrs. Davidson good-bye and went on her way, walking at a slow pace that reflected her dejection.

Happily, Margaret was not to be disappointed. She was barely out of sight of the Davidson's place when she heard the sound of a galloping horse, approaching rapidly from the west. She turned eagerly and saw, in the distance, the pony and rider she had awaited all afternoon. She turned around immediately and resumed her progress toward home. It seemed inappropriate to reveal her pleasure over their appearance. When she heard Arthur slow his mount, she turned again and waited for the pony to bring him closer.

"Where have you been all day?" she asked casually.

Arthur was not smiling and appeared to be under some restraint.

"All day!" he said. "How did you know I have been gone all day? I didn't think you were awake when I went by this morning."

Arthur's words evoked a picture of herself that morning when, in her nightshift and bare feet, she had raced to the south window hoping to catch a glimpse of him. Stifling an unexpected urge to giggle, she replied matter-of-factly, "I just came from a visit with Mrs. Davidson. She said she saw you go by very early this

morning."

"Oh, I see," said Arthur. He looked down at her with a noncommittal, almost unfriendly stare. Feeling uncomfortable under his gaze, Margaret lowered her eyes and stepped close to the pony's head. She and Petti-Brun were old friends. As she stroked the gentle animal's neck, Arthur allowed himself the luxury of staring hungrily at Margaret's lovely profile. Her adored face was not quite hidden by her hair topped so attractively by the saucy tam-o'-shanter. Arthur was puzzled. Meg's manner was as casually friendly as ever but there was a subtle difference. She appeared to be ill at ease and he had never known her to be unsure of herself.

"I went over to Norridgewock this morning to order a marker for my father's grave," said Arthur and was thunderstruck at the effect of his words on the woman he loved.

Margaret's restraint gave way. Her eyes filled with tears and she looked up at Arthur with such a forlorn expression that he caught his breath in dismay.

"Oh, Arthur! I am so ashamed! I should have been here! I never meant to add to your troubles. My father sent me away—almost as if he knew what was going to happen. You must believe that I—." Words failed her. She buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

In seconds Arthur was off the pony. Scarcely aware of what he was doing he gathered Margaret into his embrace and cradled her head against his shoulder.

"Meg! Please don't cry! I knew it couldn't have been your fault! You mustn't cry like this!"

In the next instant he realized that he was holding Margaret in his arms—a liberty he had never taken. He moved as if to release her but she would not have it so. Her arms went round his neck and, with eyes closed, she turned her face up to his for the comforting caress she seemed to expect.

Stiffnecked, Arthur looked down at the tear-stained cheeks, the closed eyes, and the trembling lips. The full force of the longing he had lived with for years descended upon him with almost irresistible temptation. He touched her cheek gently with his lips. It was not enough for her. She strained upward on tiptoe and kissed him passionately, full on the mouth. Arthur's resistance

crumbled. Exhilarated by the message in her clinging embrace, he kissed her cheeks, her eyelids, and her willing lips, again and again, until, weak and trembling, she clung helplessly to him with her head against his chest.

"Oh, Meg! This must be a dream! I love you, darling! I can't remember when I didn't. Can I believe that you love me, too?" He put his hands on her shoulders and held her away, that he might look for an answer in her radiant face.

There was no hint of reservation in her reply.

"Of course, dear! Can't you tell?" And she went back into his embrace with a sigh of contentment that sent his spirits soaring.

For ecstatic moments they stood with arms about each other, lost in mutual discovery. The pony, supremely disinterested, wandered off to nibble at a few green shoots that had responded to the spring sun and rain.

Finally, Margaret disengaged herself gently from Arthur's embrace.

"Arthur, dear, I must sit down and catch my breath. Come, let's sit here."

In the shadow of the pines beside the road, there was a large flat boulder upon which Margaret seated herself and arranged her modish long skirt so that the tips of her boots were barely visible. Arthur, entranced, sat beside her and captured one of her small hands that he held as reverently and carefully as if it were fashioned of fragile china. Margaret smiled at him fondly. Impulsively, with the fingers of her free hand, she reached out to touch his tanned cheek.

"Arthur," she said, "why have you never told me until now that you loved me? I must be the very dullest person in the world not to have suspected it!"

Arthur's dark eyes became troubled. With startling abruptness he stood and faced her.

"Look at me, Meg. Did you ever see me in anything but buckskins?"

Self-consciously he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Meg, I am a lumberman—nothing more—accustomed to working among men who are not always polite in speech and actions. I don't approve of everything they do and say but I feel at ease among them and they accept me. I am a "half-breed,"

according to your father. Should I have made love to a rich man's daughter who is accustomed to a life-style that wealth can provide—to a lovely, refined woman who is at home in Norridgewock's best circles where I would be unacceptable as well as uncomfortable. Besides, I never felt encouraged to treat you as if I hoped to make you my wife!"

"I know, darling," said Margaret. "Because I know so little about love I failed to recognize how I really felt about you. You never challenged me to analyze my feelings. Perhaps if you had tried to make love to me—but you never did. Arthur, there is no barrier between us and there never will be. You are making yourself out to be a country bumpkin and that is simply not true. Your instincts are finer and your manners better than any other man I know. You have all the qualities I admire. And what in the world does wearing buckskins have to do with a man's character? Wear them as long as you live, if you wish, my dear. You look wonderful in them—so virile—such a tower of strength and dependability. As for being a lumberman, were it not for your expert labor and that of others in your dangerous occupation my father would not enjoy the wealth and the power he often abuses. I would have to be deaf and blind not to know how most of the valley people feel about a man who flaunts his wealth as my father is fond of doing. But everyone admires you, darling, and I love you with all my heart! I don't know how to play the coquette about this, Arthur. I know that I love you. I think I always shall."

Arthur's face became a study in rapture. He went down on his knees in front of Margaret. His strong calloused fingers grasped both her hands and bore them to his lips. Speechless with emotion he remained kneeling with head bowed for several seconds while Margaret, weeping silently, hovered over him as if about to gather his head to her breast.

"Oh, Meg," said Arthur, looking up, "I've made you cry again!"

"No, no, darling, it's all right," said Margaret with a sobbing little laugh. "I'm crying because I'm happier than I've ever been in all my life!"

Some semblance of composure being at last restored, they were once more seated side by side. Arthur's arm was about Margaret's waist and her head was nestled on his shoulder.

"Meg," said Arthur, "this is the happiest day of my life too. I had almost convinced myself that you would never love me. How can I tell you what it means to me when you say you do! This is the answer to all my prayers. I have never loved anyone but you, Meg. You can't know how many times I have prayed for the chance to tell you that! And because you mean more to me than life itself I don't want you to be hurt. I must tell you that I am a little afraid."

"Afraid!" said Margaret incredulously. "Arthur, you have never been afraid of anything in your life! Afraid of what, for pity's sake?"

"Afraid for you, Meg," said Arthur. "Can you imagine what your father will say, or worse, what he will do, if we tell him we love each other?"

"Can I not, indeed!" said Margaret. "And don't say 'if we tell him' but 'when we tell him,' as I am certainly going to do. It is what he has done already that made me realize how precious our relationship is to me." She proceeded to tell Arthur of the angry confrontation with her father , as well as the removal of the horses.

"Meg, that's an example of what I mean," said Arthur with a frown. "Surely it is an indication of more of the same to come. Forgive me for saying so, but your father has the reputation of being abusive to those who cross him. You will be saying that you love a Saint-Pierre, a man your father despises—a man your father long ago assigned to a lower place in society than the one you occupy."

"I know, dear," said Margaret. "Some of the things he has said and done are shameful and revealed a side of him I never really knew, or, perhaps I should say, didn't want to admit about my own father. As for our place in society, I know he thinks my place is with Sybil's crowd, but I'll never agree to that. If you only knew how bored I am with most of the people in Sybil's snobbish little circle. I never feel at home among them. I love this valley and never want to leave it. This is where I want to be, among the good people I have known since I was born. You know how my father keeps trying to discourage me from taking over as schoolteacher next fall when Mrs. Fairbrother retires, but I am more than ever determined to do it. The mothers I have

spoken to seem pleased that I will be the next teacher. I know I can do it and I know I will enjoy doing something useful. Best of all, I'll be able to stay in the valley and be near you. I guess I'm not being very ladylike, but I don't care. I love you, Arthur. Nothing my father can do or say will ever change that!"

Deeply affected, Arthur touched Margaret's cheek lightly with his fingers and kissed her.

"Meg, you must know that what you are saying sounds wonderful to me. For a long time I have not looked to the future with much anticipation because life would not be worth living without you. I want you for my wife, Meg. Will you marry me and take whatever we must face together?"

She looked at him with shining eyes and said, with no hesitation, "Of course I'll marry you, darling. I could never belong to anyone else!"

Arthur stood and held out his arms. Margaret put her hands in his and was drawn to her feet and into his embrace. In the lengthening shadows of the pines they sealed their betrothal with a lingering caress that left them both a little breathless.

Arthur was the first to notice that the sun had sunk below the horizon.

"Meg, I've lost all sense of time! It's getting late. I don't want to let you go but won't you be expected home in a little while?"

"Oh dear, you are right, of course. If I'm not home before my father he is sure to demand an explanation for being late. He always lectures me whenever I am out alone after dark."

"Now that is one thing on which he and I could agree," said Arthur. "I'd worry about you too if you were walking this road after dark. So let's get you home. The pony can easily carry us both as far as the bend in the road. There's still time if we hurry."

Arthur brought the pony to stand near Margaret. While she was wondering how they could both ride without a saddle, Arthur swept her up in his arms and deposited her, side saddle, in back of the pony's withers.

"Meg, I never realized!" said Arthur. "You're as light as a feather!"

"Which is a good thing for the sake of this poor pony," said Margaret, trying not to show how thrilled she was by the ease with which Arthur had handled her.

"Don't worry about Petit-Brun," said Arthur. "He's stronger than father's Arabian and he needs the workout he's getting today. Here, *ma chérie,* hold the reins and let me show you how I mount when I'm in a hurry."

Arthur was like a happy little boy. He backed away a few paces behind the pony, advanced a few quick steps, and bounded upward with the graceful ease of a gymnast, landing astride the animal in back of Margaret. His arms encircled her. Grasping the reins, he yelled, "Here we go, *ma petite!"* Margaret laughed and leaned back within Arthur's embrace. Even Petit-Brun seemed to catch the spirit of the occasion as he broke into a gallop.

It required but a few minutes to reach the bend of the road, just out of sight of the Parkman mansion. Arthur lifted Margaret down. She stepped close and hugged him.

"Oh Arthur," she said with a catch in her voice, "you have a shameless woman on your hands! I wish we could elope, right this minute! I couldn't bear to lose you now!"

"Meg, there's not a chance of that. Anyone who gives us trouble is likely to wish he had never been born! That sounds pretty grim, doesn't it? What I mean is that you must not worry about anything coming between us. I've waited all my life to hear you love me and will marry me. I don't intend to let anyone take you away from me—not even your father. I must admit that it is a temptation to take you to the nearest preacher but I don't like the idea of running away like scared rabbits. We have done nothing except to discover that we love each other. For the sake of my ego I would like to go to your father and ask for your hand. I believe that is what an honorable man would do."

"Oh Arthur," said Margaret, "I love you for that but I can't believe it will do any good."

"Nor do I, really," said Arthur, "but let me tell you what I think we should do and then I'll leave it up to you. You have never steered me wrong in your life. You won't be twenty-one for two weeks. Not that you need to be in order to get married but I know your father's views on dutiful children. Unless he's been misquoted, he says that no child is his own boss until he is at least twenty-one and sometimes not even then. I suggest that we wait the two weeks. If you agree, I will go to your father and ask for his consent to our marriage. If he refuses, as he

probably will, it wouldn't bother my conscience to take you to Norridgewock, or wherever you wish, and get a minister to marry us. And now that I've said all that, you have only to say the word and I'll take you away right now! What do you think, Meg? I'll do whatever you say."

"Oh, Arthur," said Margaret with a sigh, "you're asking me to make a sensible choice, I suppose, and I don't feel the least bit sensible. How do you expect me to be rational when I'm standing here with your arms around me!"

"I know—I know," said Arthur and kissed her again.

"You're no help!" said Margaret and pushed him away. "Now stand where you are and let me think for a minute!"

"Meg," said Arthur contritely, "I guess I'm being unfair. You don't have to decide anything right now. It was thoughtless of me to put the burden on you."

Margaret looked at him with a wry smile.

"Darling, I was just remembering how many times I have given you advice when I'm sure you didn't need it. Now you are asking for it at the most important time of our lives and you have every right to know how I feel. I want our marriage to be the most glorious event it can possibly be. First, I don't want to go to Norridgewock or anywhere else away from the valley. I would like to have the minister come here and marry us in the meetinghouse with all our friends around us. I want the whole settlement to know that we belong to each other. My father wouldn't dare to interfere."

Arthur's dark eyes sparkled with admiration.

"What an angel you are, Meg! You always know what is best. Of course we should be married here. Nothing would suit me better."

Margaret stepped back within his embrace and hid her face against his shoulder.

"My dear, I don't feel very angelic right now. You'd better kiss me and let me go. We can see each other tomorrow night at prayer meeting."

When Arthur had kissed her and released her she took a few steps, then ran back into his willing arms for one last embrace. Finally, reluctantly, they said their good-byes and Margaret turned toward home.

Arthur watched until Margaret was out of sight, then mounted the pony and rode back in the opposite direction toward Norridgewock. He thought it unwise to ride past the Parkman residence. Mrs. Gooch knew he was somewhere on the road and if he were to follow closely behind Margaret the housekeeper would be certain to suspect a meeting had taken place and tell Parkman. There was no point in courting trouble. Daylight was fading rapidly. He put the pony to a gallop and rode back to where a bridle path led north away from the main road. Many riders used the narrow horse trail to reach the north end of the valley without going down into the center of the settlement. The much-used path skirted the Parkman property and eventually crossed the Wiggins, nearly two miles upstream, by means of a hanging bridge that the upper-valley families kept in repair.

Arthur had reached a spot in the bridle path where the terrain began to fall away toward the river. As he was about to ride down the slope he heard, in the gathering darkness, the neighing of horses. Upon investigation he found all of Parkman's horses enclosed in an old corral long since abandoned by its original owner. Arthur spat in disgust. This matter of the horses was childish. What could Parkman be thinking about to do such a thing? Everyone in the valley was accustomed to seeing Meg riding all over the valley, wherever and whenever she pleased. There would surely be talk if she was forced to walk everywhere she went. Perhaps Meg was right in assuming that the removal of the horses was merely a warning and not intended to be permanent. For a moment, he was tempted to turn Meg's mare loose in the pasture, merely for the satisfaction of doing something contrary to Parkman's wishes. I guess that would make me as childish as he is, thought Arthur and rode on. The horse affair made Arthur uneasy. What would the old villain do next?

At the hanging bridge he dismounted and led the pony across the bridge. The turbulence of the waters was a reflection of the excitement that had shaken him to the core. What a day it had been! He had gone from apprehension to glory, all in a few hours. He could still feel the softness of Meg's arms about his neck. He still thrilled to the promise of her kisses—caresses for which she seemed as fiercely hungry as he was himself. At the same time he was worried over what Meg's father would do when he found

out what had happened.

After crossing the river Arthur mounted and gave the pony his head. Lost in thought he paid scant attention to the direction taken by the sorrel and the trail-wise animal needed no supervision. He carried his preoccupied master across the settlement road and up the east slope to the camp trail where, without hesitation, he turned south and headed for home. In spite of the darkness the surefooted pony followed the trail unerringly.

Arthur was still lost in his thoughts when Petit-Brun finally came to a stop with his muzzle pointed toward the stable door.

Chapter 7

On Wednesday, the Parkman household returned to its customary uneventful routine, remarkable only because of Parkman's unexpectedly docile behavior. He appeared to be at pains to have his presence felt as little as possible. He left for the mill very early in the morning and returned just in time for supper, after which he shut himself away behind the closed door of his office. His manner toward Margaret was coolly impersonal. He gave the impression of having forgotten completely the bitter Monday night exchange that had exposed his violent temper and his uncompromising animosity toward Arthur. The horses were back in the stable. Under other circumstances Margaret might have been uneasy over her father's studied calmness but she was so engrossed in rose-colored plans for the future that she could think of little else.

That evening, Margaret and Mrs. Gooch attended prayer meeting without Parkman, who never took part in such services except on special occasions. Margaret was understandably eager to see Arthur again and had decided not to be concerned over what Mrs. Gooch might report to her father. Nothing the housekeeper could do or say would alter the course she and Arthur had set for themselves—of that she was blissfully certain. To her surprise, at the close of the meeting, Mrs. Gooch lingered in conversation with a friend and paid no attention when Margaret and Arthur left the building together. Once outside they ran, hand in hand, like happy children, around the corner of the meetinghouse. In

the darkness, they embraced.

For magical, blissful moments they stood feeling the need only to touch without speaking.

Finally Arthur asked the question that had been on his mind all day.

"How are things at home, Meg? Any trouble?"

"None at all, dear. I don't understand why my father is acting as if nothing had happened, but I don't really care. I must tell you something. I went up to the attic this morning and tried on my mother's old wedding dress that has been stored in her cedar chest all these years. Oh, Arthur, it is such a lovely dress! It must have been very expensive. The material is just beautiful. With very little alteration I could wear it. Would you think me too sentimental if I do?"

"Of course not, Meg. I know you will look lovely in the dress. I was too young to remember what your mother looked like when she was married but she must have been very beautiful because Mrs. Fairbrother says you look just like her."

"Thank you for the compliment, kind sir!" said Margaret. "Poor Mrs. Fairbrother! It is so sad that she is losing her eyesight. I intend asking her to help me with the alterations. I have a lot to learn about sewing."

"Meg, before we have to go, can you tell me when you want to have the wedding? I'd like to go to Norridgewock next week and talk to Reverend Lewis. That is, if you want him to marry us."

"Of course, dear," said Margaret. "I was thinking of Reverend Lewis too. I understand he plans to move into the valley right away. At last we will have a real minister. Arthur, your bride-to-be will be twenty-one a week from next Monday and we can be married the next day if you wish, but now I'm going to be still more sentimental, if you will let me. I have always thought I would like to be a June bride, but that would mean waiting another two weeks. How do you feel about that?"

"Meg, if I can wait for two weeks I can certainly wait for two more. After all, I've been waiting most of my life to hear you say you love me enough to marry me. Just don't change your mind while we're waiting!"

"Oh Arthur!" said Margaret. "Don't say that! Don't even think it! If I thought you were really worried about that I'd go away

with you right now—tonight!"

"Sorry, Meg," said Arthur. "I shouldn't have said that. I don't mean to imply that our marriage doesn't mean as much to you as it does to me. Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, dear," said Margaret, "but you must believe me when I say I'll never, never change my mind, Arthur, I am yours to claim whenever you want me. I probably shouldn't say that, but it's true."

"Oh Meg! What am I doing to you? You don't have to commit yourself like that! I know you belong to me just as I belong to you. Please forget I said anything about changing your mind."

Mentally kicking himself for causing Meg's distress, he kissed her and said, "I'd better figure out what day of the week June first falls on, so I can tell Reverend Lewis when we'll want him."

"It falls on Tuesday," said Margaret quickly.

"So!" said Arthur with a chuckle. "You're way ahead of me! You knew I would agree to wait. You know me pretty well, don't you?"

"I intend knowing you much better," said Margaret almost inaudibly and mentally thanked the darkness for hiding her flaming cheeks.

"I hear Mrs. Gooch talking," said Arthur. "She must be ready to go. Here's a kiss to last until Sunday. I probably won't see you until then."

With lighted lanthorn in hand, Mrs. Gooch was standing outside the front entrance and still talking to her friend. She said nothing when Margaret and Arthur, looking a little guilty, stepped from the shadows, except to indicate to Margaret that it was past time to leave for home. To Arthur her attitude seemed a little less unfriendly, her voice a little less waspish. Margaret and Arthur were never to know that she had become, in effect, their champion and someone quite the opposite of a spy for Parkman.

Arthur stood and watched the moving light of the lanthorn until it was lost to sight when Margaret and the housekeeper passed inside the covered bridge below the dam. Entering the meetinghouse he rearranged the tables and chairs to set the room up for school the next day and extinguished the lanthorns that hung on each wall. The hour was not late and he decided to walk over to Eli Farrar's blacksmith shop. Eli was obviously still at

work because there was a glow of light streaming from the open doors of the long, rambling building.

Farrar's shop conformed to no known conventional architectural design. Two additions had been tacked on with little consideration for appearance, in marked contrast to the artistic excellence of articles produced by the owner. Inside and out the premises were cluttered with discards: broken pike poles and cant-dogs, worn out logging sled runners, broken barn door hinges, old horseshoes, and an endless array of iron parts left over from long-forgotten projects. Nothing, not even the smallest bit of scrap, was ever thrown away. Good metal was scarce—some of it even precious. Any blacksmith worthy of the name knew how to reheat, reshape, retemper, and thus reuse all old metal. He counted himself fortunate if one of the discards, for which he made a replacement, turned out to be good Swedish iron, especially from the furnaces of Ramnaes Bruks, or the even rarer Wootz steel from the Orient. It would be the better part of another century before the New World began to catch up with the Old World in the science of Metallurgy.

The front entrance of Eli's establishment resembled that of a stable. In cold weather the two large doors were kept closed, but, as soon as possible each year, Eli opened them wide and they remained open, night and day, until the autumn frosts came. In the midst of the littered interior stood the heart of Eli's business, his forge, with his anvil close by. The forge, a solidly built structure of bricks, consisted of a hearth, at one end of which a brick chimney extended straight up through the roof. The hearth was as high as Eli's waist. At the chimney end of the hearth was located the bellows that supplied forced air to the firebox. Eli's smithy bellows was fashioned of leather and wood. It resembled a huge pear with its stem end fitted with a nozzle. The nozzle directed air through a pipe to the underside of a slab of iron with a hole in it that formed the bottom of the firebox. By means of an ingenious arrangement of chains and a long pole for leverage, Eli could stand beside the hearth, within easy reach of his anvil, and work the bellows whenever the glowing coals needed fanning.

Eli was an exceptional eighteenth-century representative of his profession. He was no mere farrier but a craftsman blessed with

above-average ability. His father before him had been an apprentice to no less a journeyman than George Washington's smithy at Mount Vernon where he learned to shape plows and other agricultural tools. There, too, he was introduced to the rudiments of the wheel-making art and became a competent wheelwright. Eli benefited from his father's knowledge, but he was far more inventive than his parent. Never satisfied with the ordinary, he fashioned articles of exceptional beauty and usefulness. Eli's lanthorns were prized by everyone in the settlement because they were cunningly artistic and more utilitarian than any otherwise available in the territory. Every child in the valley owned a pair of skates Eli made. Lumbermen's equipment, sled runners, axes, pickaxes, barn door hinges, andirons, door latches, harness hardware, iron pot handles, cooking tools and utensils, and every imaginable metal object in common use was hammered out of red-hot iron and steel on Eli's anvil. The outdoor decorative ironwork, which Parkman added to his mansion in 1780, was created by Eli's talented hammer. Although Parkman decried the blacksmith's close ties with Saint-Pierre, his passion for possessing the best things available outweighed his disapproval of the friendship between Eli and Arthur's father. Eli made and tempered his own farrier's knives and horseshoe nails. He made square-cut nails of various sizes for use in carpentry by men who had begun to prefer them to wooden pegs. He had just solved some of Parkman's mill problems by forging replacements for the cracked saw shaft bearings. Concerning Parkman's purchase of the inferior parts Eli's remarks were candidly derisive.

"Somebody must have seen the old boy coming," he said. "Them bearings he bought were made of bog iron or I miss my guess! That stuff ain't fit for anything except maybe outhouse door hinges! The ones I made were good wrought iron, and I case-hardened them. Went to a lot of trouble with them bearings, but I don't suppose Parkman knows enough about working a piece of metal to appreciate what I did for him. Cheap too! All he'll ever know is them bearings won't crack."

As Arthur drew abreast of the open shop doors he saw Eli inside, standing beside a large wooden workbench. The blacksmith appeared to be studying intently some papers that lay on the surface of the bench. Hearing footsteps, Eli looked up

just as Arthur's tall form paused at the front entrance.

"Hey, Art! Glad you came by. Come on in a minute. Got something to show you."

Arthur stepped over to the workbench on which was lying, among other things, a cant-dog equipped with the usual metal sleeve with a sharp point but with no swivel hook attached.

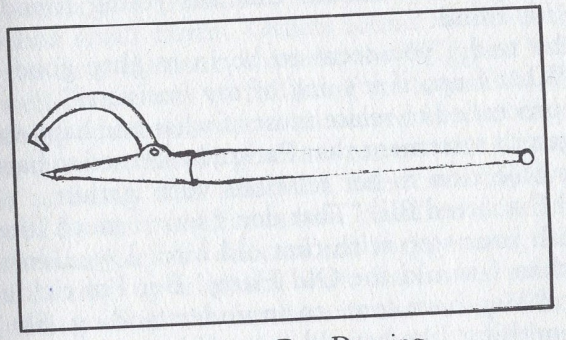
"Art," said Eli, "you know I've always said that if I had the kind of talent Rafe Davidson has I'd take a slug of rum to deaden the pain and get rid of it—like a bad tooth! Rafe's never had an idea that was worth a tinker's dam, but something he said to me yesterday set me to wondering if maybe he might have a little common sense after all. Let me ask you something. When you use a cant-dog you ain't never sure where that swivel hook's going to land, are you? Don't it flop around and sometimes grab nothing at all, so you have to make another pass at the log?"

"That's right," said Arthur. "A man's never sure of a bite on the first pass, or even the second, if he's in a hurry. I've often wished someone would design a better tool."

Eli grinned broadly and pointed to a sheet of paper he had been studying.

"Take a look at that, Art," he said. "I made that sketch according to Rafe's specifications and, by Judas, it's a good idea, even if Davidson did think it up!

The sketch was a well-drawn picture of the rigid, flat circlet of metal, intended to encircle the handle of a cant-dog. The ring was cut at one point and where it was split the ends were turned



Eli's Cant-Dog Drawing

out to make ears with a hole in each. The shank of the swivel hook, also with a hole in it, was intended to be inserted between the ears and a bolt was to be passed through all three holes to secure the hook in place. Thus fastened, the hook could move only up and down instead of flopping about haphazardly. The idea was simplicity itself and Arthur saw at once that such a method of attaching a swivel hook was a much-needed improvement on the standard cant-dog.

"You say you got this idea from Rafe Davidson?"

"Yes," said Eli. "Ain't that a caution! First thing he ever thought of that made any sense. But, you know something—there's one thing wrong with it. When you tighten the bolt so the ring won't slip, that hook ain't going to hang free. Now take a look at this drawing. I think it is better. I'm going to weld them ears right onto the sleeve, just far enough apart to let the shank of the hook slip in between. That way you won't have to tighten the bolt and the hook'll move up and down as slick as you please. How about that?"

Eli showed Arthur another drawing of the finished product as he had conceived it. It was unquestionably the perfect solution to the problem. By his improvement Eli had anticipated Joseph Peavey by about seventy years. However, his improved cant-dog would never come into general use outside of the Wiggins River territory, because no one, not even Eli, chose to promote it. Eli had solved a problem and that was all that mattered to him.

Arthur was properly enthusiastic over the blacksmith's latest brilliant idea, but Eli sensed that his young friend had other things on his mind.

"Art," he said, "you seem to be in mighty good spirits this evening. What's up, if it's any of my business?"

Arthur proceeded to relate most of what had happened, ending with Margaret's statement that Parkman seemed to have forgotten his violent objection to her relations with Arthur.

"Humph!" snorted Eli. "That don't sound much like Parkman! Better watch your step with that old bird! I wouldn't trust him any more than I would the Old Harry! But I'm tickled to death that you and Meg have come to an understanding. She's an awful nice girl—nothing like her old man. If I could have found a girl like her when I was young and she'd been willing to put up with

me I'd most likely have got married."

As Arthur walked home that evening, his mind fairly buzzed with plans for the future. In spite of Eli's words of caution, he was much easier in his mind over Meg's situation at home. If Parkman will just continue to behave himself, thought Arthur, then I won't be sorry we decided to wait. But if that old buzzard gives her any more trouble he'll lose her a lot sooner than he stands to right now.

Chapter 8

Monty Parkman, the inspired leader of the original Wiggins Valley colony, had envisioned the development of the little settlement as a city and set about to stimulate its growth. He laid out and directed the clearing of the roadway into the valley and the building of the covered bridge spanning the Wiggins River below the dam. He persuaded the brothers Fairbrother, James and Edward, to settle in the valley and furnished the lumber at token cost to enable them to erect the trading post buildings. James, the bachelor elder brother, died during the second year of trading, but Edward and Rachel, Edward's young bride, carried on a rapidly expanding business. Other newcomers who did not work in Monty's sawmill found that there was a good living to be made at trapping the plentiful beaver. The trading post handled the furs for shipment to Europe where they commanded excellent prices. Still other late arrivals to the valley brought dairy cattle and established small farms. Others found work in the lumber camps. At the time of Monty's death, the Wiggins Valley settlement was well on its way to fulfilling its founder's dream.

The cause of education was well served in the valley. Rachel Fairbrother, a sweet-faced, gentle woman, was a born teacher. In addition to being well educated, she loved children with an ardor inspired by her inability to have children of her own. When Monty learned of Rachel's educational background, he conceived the idea of setting up a school with Rachel as teacher. Monty called a meeting of all the families in the valley. An agreement was drawn up whereby any family that had children or might have them in the future would pay a modest amount for their

instruction, in goods the trading post could handle profitably. Rachel taught the first few children in a small room that Edward partitioned off in a corner of one of the post buildings. In time, families grew in size and as new families arrived it became apparent that more suitable quarters were needed. Monty supplied the lumber and the townspeople built the large one-room building that was, in 1788, still serving the settlement as both schoolhouse and church meetinghouse. That year marked the end of Rachel Fairbrother's service as a teacher. Advancing age and failing eyesight forced her to make plans for retirement from the occupation she loved so well. Margaret Parkman had been one of her brightest pupils and, when approached, was delighted with the prospect of taking Rachel's place. Winston Parkman did not share his daughter's enthusiasm.

It was not in Parkman's nature to surrender unconditionally any position he had taken but he had, albeit reluctantly, finally agreed that Margaret could take over the school for one year. She was left with the impression that her father thought she would eventually find the job too difficult.

At the end of the week of Margaret and Arthur's tryst, Sunday came and went in uneventful fashion. Parkman accompanied his daughter and his housekeeper to Sunday morning church service.

Upon entering the building Parkman, looking neither to right nor left, strode down the aisle and took his seat on the front row—a seat that, by tacit consent, was never occupied by anyone other than Parkman. Margaret seated herself at the organ and managed to exchange glances with Arthur—loving glances unobserved save by every woman in the congregation. Word had gotten around among the womenfolk of the valley that there was "something going on" between Arthur and Margaret. Parkman's arrival was a signal that the service could begin. It was as if a monarch had ascended his throne and was now ready for court proceedings to commence. Arthur leaned over Margaret's shoulder and placed a hymn book on the organ music rack. With his back to the congregation he rested his hand for the briefest moment on Margaret's shoulder and she brushed the back of his hand with an equally brief touch of her fingertips. In that almost imperceptible exchange there was perfect understanding.

Margaret played a doxology, Seth Perkins intoned his usual

lengthy invocation, and the assembled company joined in singing a familiar Watts hymn that everyone knew by heart. Seth then proceeded to deliver one of the three sermons he had used for years with slight variations. His delivery left something to be desired, but his piercing tones had the advantage of being loud enough to keep everybody awake. Despite his lack of oratorical skill his sincerity was unmistakable. Arthur would long remember the spectacle of old Seth, white of hair and beard, as he stood brandishing aloft a dog-eared copy of the King James Bible and declaiming upon the errors of sinful mankind, present company excepted, of course.

Because of Parkman's presence, Margaret and Arthur made no attempt to talk privately. Instead, when Margaret handed the hymnal to Arthur he pressed into her hand some folded papers that she thrust quickly inside the modest neck of her bodice. At the close of the service, many of the townspeople lingered in front of the meetinghouse and exchanged greetings with their neighbors, but Parkman left for home immediately and, as always, insisted that Margaret and Mrs. Gooch accompany him. Having maintained his pious public image by attending Sunday morning services, Margaret's father never felt any compulsion to exchange small talk with other members of the congregation. The towns people were so accustomed to his snobbery that they would have been astonished if he had ever attempted to engage in friendly conversation.

That afternoon, in the privacy of her room, Margaret unfolded eagerly the papers Arthur had given her.

"My dearest Meg," Arthur had written, "How satisfying it is to be able to address you so! I think of all the years that have passed when I longed to tell you of my love and did not dare. You always seemed so far beyond my reach, like the angel I know you to be. I have to keep telling myself that this is not a dream—that it is really true that we are to share the future together. I have held you close in my arms—a privilege I thought I would never experience. How can I tell you what a joy that is! I have loved you, dreamed about you, wanted you for such a long time! I count myself the most blessed of men to know that you love and want me too, and have agreed to be mine for the rest of our lives.

"We have shared many confidences over the years and I am sure that you know me very well, probably better than I know myself. You are aware of my weaknesses and you know that pessimism is foreign to my nature. There was never any reason for me to be cynical about life because I have had the best of it—a sound body, a doting father, and, best of all, your friendship. Now that I am about to realize my dream of happiness I cannot assign any logical reason for a vague feeling of uneasiness that is bothering me. I want to assure you, as strongly as I can, that my uneasiness is not born of the thought that you might change your mind about marrying me. What I said Wednesday night was ill advised. I guess the trouble is that I don't consider myself any prize for a lovely refined woman like you and that is why I am having difficulty believing in my good fortune.

"I am far from satisfied with the material possessions I have to offer you. I would be even more dissatisfied if I were not aware of your sensible approach to such matters. I recall the times we have discussed the futility of allowing the pursuit of great wealth to dominate one's existence. We will be adequately housed, well fed and clothed, as will the children we both want. I have already had a very handsome offer for the Kennebec River property and the valuable acres of timberland we will own is still untouched. My cabin isn't much, of course, but together we can plan and build a better place to live. I think you would like that and I know I would. Oh Meg, is it not a truly wonderful future that lies ahead of us!

"Darling, I intend going to Norridgewock tomorrow. The stonecutter said he would have my father's headstone ready by then, so I shall rent a buggy from Tom Hanson and go early in the morning. I wish you could go with me so we could talk to Reverend Lewis together, but I guess it would not be wise to risk a disagreement with your father just now.

"Meg, my lovely, lovely bride-to-be, when you promised to be my wife you gave me the assurance that I shall have everything I need in life to make it complete. I promise to spend the rest of my life trying to be a good husband. God bless and watch over you, dear. Always your devoted, Arthur."

Magaret's cheeks were wet with tears as she finished reading Arthur's words. Impulsively she kissed his signature and hugged

his first love letter to her breast. She fell asleep to the sound of a downpour that had developed during the evening.

Chapter 9

On Monday morning, Margaret awoke with a sense that all was well with her world. She drew from beneath her pillow the folded pages of the only love letter she had ever received. She reread it and pressed the signature to her lips. She then lay for a few moments with her cheek resting upon the letter that was so reassuring of happiness to come. Darling Arthur! How like him to be concerned with what he had to offer her. In a few more weeks, he would understand that all she wanted was Arthur himself. She fell to fantasizing over what it might be like to rest securely within the masterful embrace of her husband. Her cheeks began to burn. This would never do! She arose and went to the front window. Pushing aside the curtains she gazed across the valley. It was a lovely morning. A brilliant sun was rising. Beneath its warming rays, wisps of steam drifted up from the damp shingles on the roof of the mill beneath the brow of the plateau. She saw no sign of activity about the Saint-Pierre cabin on the eastern height. No smoke arose from the chimney. Arthur was probably up and away by this time. She had slept later than usual. Sleep had eluded her until very late, partly because of the furor of the storm, but mainly because the words of Arthur's letter had persisted in floating around in her thoughts like the notes of a lovely melody.

Margaret had promised Rachel Fairbrother that she would help her with plans for graduating the children who had completed the instruction courses available in the valley. Mrs. Fairbrother hoped to make the graduation a memorable occasion, since it would be the last in which she would be actively involved. It was, of course, fitting that Margaret be included in the proceedings since the responsibility thereafter would be hers.

Margaret prepared her own breakfast, abiding by a standing agreement with Mrs. Gooch that whenever she slept late she would fix her own meal and wash the dishes. That done she donned her jacket and tam- o'-shanter and started to leave by

kitchen door, just as Mrs. Gooch came in from the milk room.

"You'd better not go out with those shoes on," cautioned the housekeeper. "That road is a sea of mud." Her voice was almost solicitous.

"Of course, I'm sure you are right," replied Margaret. "I'll go put on my boots."

As she ran upstairs Margaret was thinking with satisfaction that Mrs. Gooch had become less querulous and critical. Her manner was almost friendly and the change was a welcome one. It was an embellishment that served to heighten Margaret's feeling of well-being.

The road into the valley was, indeed, a veritable river of mud, but that was merely a minor inconvenience to Margaret. She resisted an impulse to go skipping along like a young child. The air was fresh and bracing. The sun seemed never to have shone so brightly. The sky seemed never to have been such a brilliant blue.

As Margaret emerged from the covered bridge and started up the north road, she observed a small knot of men standing in the street in front of the trading post. She saw one, Ed Fairbrother, leave the group and head in the direction of the schoolhouse. At the same time Eli Farrar, who had been watching Margaret's descent of the hill, broke away and came to intercept her.

"Good morning, Mister Farrar," said Margaret. "Isn't it a lovely day?"

"That it is, Miss Margaret," Eli agreed. "About as good as a body could ask for. If you're looking to buy something from Ed Fairbrother, he just went over to the schoolhouse to see Rachel about something. Be back in a minute, I expect."

"That doesn't matter," said Margaret. "I don't need anything this morning. Actually, I'm going to visit Mrs. Fairbrother myself."

"I see," said Eli, stroking his beard. "Miss Margaret, I don't want you to think I'm nosey. I ain't really. What I'm getting at is—well, I think as much of Arthur Saint-Pierre as I would if he was my own boy. We're pretty good friends and he tells me things. For instance, he says you and him have had an understanding and I just want to say I'm tickled to death!"

Margaret blushed prettily.

"Yes, Isn't it wonderful! Did he tell you we plan to be married next month?"

Eli sucked in his breath audibly.

"Well, no, he didn't say when—just said it was settled. What's your father think of the idea?"

Margaret's smile faded. There was a note of defiance in her answer.

"To tell the truth, Mister Farrar, we haven't told him yet and what my father thinks will have little bearing on our plans to be married!"

Eli glanced toward the schoolhouse. Fairbrother was on his way back.

"Here comes Ed now," said Eli, as if it mattered. "Miss Margaret, we're all glad you're going to stay in the valley and teach."

Margaret was smiling once more.

"Thank you, Mister Farrar. I'm looking forward to it. I hope I can do half as well as Mrs. Fairbrother. It will not be easy to follow in her footsteps."

"I wouldn't worry my head none about that, if I was you," said Eli. "You'll do just fine."

Margaret excused herself and Eli let her go. Fairbrother had rejoined the other two men of the group: Tom Hanson, the livery stable owner, and a man Margaret recognized as a logger who worked with Arthur. They all greeted her warmly as she passed and each stared after her with concern in his eyes.

Eli rejoined the group and looked questioningly at Fairbrother.

"Yes, I told Rachel not to say anything," said Fairbrother. "Maybe she wouldn't have anyway but you can never tell about those two. Rachel loves that girl as much as if she belonged to us, and I was afraid she'd think that Arthur's sweetheart ought to be told right away. It's too bad my wife heard me talking to Joe in the first place, but she'll keep her mouth shut. She promised."

"Joe" was Joseph Bonneau, Arthur's second chopper. He had come down early that morning to see Arthur. He found the back door of the cabin standing open and Arthur's bunk undisturbed, but was not alarmed until he found the old dog, Rusty, with his head bashed in, lying dead beside the stable. Convinced that something was wrong, he hurried down to the trading post and

told Ed Fairbrother what he had seen. Ed immediately called Hanson and Eli into conference.

"Lord A'mighty!" said Fairbrother. "I hope this don't turn out to be as bad as it looks! What do you think we ought to do, Eli?"

Farrar wasted little time in indecision.

"I think you and Tom should go about your business like nothing's wrong because maybe nothing is. Joe and me'll go back up on the hill and see what we can figure out. No sense getting everybody all riled up when we ain't sure yet that anything bad has happened."

Eli and Bonneau spent much of the forenoon searching the Saint-Pierre property. They found Arthur's lanthorn overturned on the ground inside the stable. Bonneau, an experienced tracker, pointed to some clear-cut boot prints in the dirt floor of the stable.

"Those track!" he said. "Made last night, I bet you! One damn beeg man!"

It was obvious, even to Eli, that the boot marks had been made by a person much heavier than Arthur. He studied the imprints while striving to reconstruct what might have happened.

"What the hell would a big man, or any man but Art, be doing in this stable last night? And why would Art come out here after dark and never go back to the cabin? Looks to me as if that was the way of it. His lanthorn's out here where it don't belong and you said his bunk ain't been slept in."

"Maybe he have business with thees man and go away with him," suggested Bonneau lamely.

"Yeah, I bet he went away with him!" said Eli. "But I'm thinking it wasn't no business trip! Come on, Joe, you don't think that neither! What about poor old Rusty? Art wouldn't kill his own dog! That's what got you all het up in the first place, remember? No sir, Joe, I don't think Art went away because he wanted to. I think somebody took him!"

"But Arthur he have no enemy!" objected Bonneau.

"No enemies, eh?" said Eli. "What about that big baboon he had a fuss with at camp a couple of weeks ago? Didn't you know about him? Nelson's boy got home from camp last week and told us all about how Art put a bully named McKelvy in his place because he was picking on an old man. I had hard work believing Art would ever get that mad, but it seems he did. What about

that bully boy? Nelson said he was a mighty big man."

"*Nom de Dieu!*" exclaimed Bonneau. "I forget him! One damn bad man!"

Bonneau rolled his eyes and tapped his forehead with his finger. The message was clear—McKelvy was crazy.

Eli dug a grave in back of the stable and buried the dog.

"Poor old feller," said Eli. "Wish you could tell us what happened here last night!"

In another conference with Fairbrother, Hanson, and Bonneau, Eli suggested that for the time being it would serve no purpose to reveal what were, after all, merely suspicious indications that foul play might have been done.

"Art was taken away—no doubt about that, far's I'm concerned, but I ain't no prophet. He could still show up. How about keeping this quiet for a spell and let me do some nosing around. It ain't going to do no good to go off half-cocked, especially where Margaret Parkman is concerned."

All agreed to let Eli have his way and Bonneau left for home. Eli went back up on the hill and began searching the woods around the clearing. About a hundred yards into the woods, he found a spot where horses had been standing. The heavy rain had obliterated many of the hoof marks and it was impossible to tell how many animals had been there or in which direction they had gone. On the chance that the horses had traveled south, Eli continued his search in that direction and eventually came upon signs where horses had trampled the underbrush in single file. To the expert eye of a blacksmith, it was clear that three animals had passed that way. Eli followed the faint trail of hoof prints that soon veered west to the river and became lost in the well-traveled bridle trail on the east side of the Wiggins. It seemed probable that the kidnappers, if that was what they were, had not headed north to the settlement but had traveled south with their captive.

"Humph!" muttered Eli. "Must've taken two of them to take him away. That don't seem exactly like McKelvy's doing. I better find out if anybody knows where he is."

Eli now felt certain that Arthur had actually been kidnapped. Very early on Tuesday morning he moved the Saint-Pierre horses down to Hanson's livery stable and took the cow up the camp

trail to Bonneau's little farm in the north end of the valley. Despite the early hour, Eli's actions did not go unnoticed and, by Wednesday, the word was out that Arthur Saint-Pierre had gone away. When he failed to appear at prayer meeting Wednesday evening and nobody had seen him for three days, Margaret was forced to believe the report that Arthur had left town. She was surprised and hurt because her future husband had not seen fit to discuss his departure with her. In her search for excuses, she recalled that Bonneau had been in town on Monday. Perhaps Arthur had been called back to camp again. She had long been accustomed to Arthur's absence during lumbering season. In the past he had not always told her when he was leaving—it was a yearly occurrence, remarkable to no one. But that was before Arthur had held her in his arms and asked her to marry him. She was dismayed over what appeared to be thoughtlessness in the man she loved. Every woman in Wiggins Valley was quite certain that Margaret loved Arthur and those who inquired were astonished when, visibly embarrassed, she admitted that she was not sure where Arthur had gone or why.

Eventually it was learned that Arthur had not returned to camp and the reason for his departure remained a mystery. The townspeople who had seen Eli moving the Saint-Pierre animals assumed that he must have knowledge of Arthur's whereabouts, but Eli's answers to queries did nothing to satisfy the questioners. Determined to avoid raising an alarm until he could investigate further, the blacksmith trod deliberately a path between fact and fiction.

"Yeah, Art went away," he said, "but he couldn't or wouldn't tell me where he was going or how long he expected to be gone. I reckon it's his business and he'll show up when he gets around to it."

Margaret kept her own counsel as much as possible and tried to avoid being drawn into any discussion of Arthur's apparent defection. She tried bravely to hide the ache in her heart, but Rachel Fairbrother, who loved her, noted with sympathy the sadness in the girl's eyes whenever Arthur's name was mentioned.

"It breaks my heart," Rachel told her husband, "to see that poor child trying to act as if nothing happened, when all the while she must be wondering whether Arthur is dead or alive. She doesn't deserve what she's going through. Has Eli done

anything about his investigation?"

"Not yet," said Fairbrother. "He says he has a couple of ideas but that's all he would tell me. I know Eli—he won't say anything until he's sure. But you can bet he'll never give up until he finds out what happened. He thinks as much of Arthur as you do of Margaret."

The June wedding day, planned so happily, came and went. Weeping brokenheartedly, Margaret folded her mother's lovely wedding gown and laid it away and with it all her romantic plans for the future—plans so trustingly made and so suddenly dashed. Alone in the garret of the Parkman mansion, kneeling among the treasures of a mother who was only a memory, Arthur's betrothed bowed her head and prayed for strength to bear up under the misfortune that threatened to overwhelm her. It was her darkest hour and a time for searching in desperation for answers to the riddle of Arthur's disappearance. Over and over she asked herself whether she, without realizing it, might have driven Arthur away. Had she, in her disregard for the age-old rules of courtship, been too forward? Had it been a mistake to let him know how eager she was to be his wife? She recalled how he tended to exaggerate the difference in their social positions and the barrier he seemed to think existed between them. Had Arthur been more apprehensive than he had been willing to admit? Had he felt out of his element and decided to withdraw, perhaps temporarily, from the rapid pace of their approach to marriage? Even as she asked herself such questions she was not really convinced that any of them was the answer to the puzzle. She had known Arthur too long and too intimately to believe he had lied when he had named himself "the most blessed of men," because she loved him. To credit him with such a cruel deception she would have to think he had suffered a complete reversal of his personal code of honor—the code that had governed his actions through all the years she had known him. It was simply not possible for the man she loved to be such a turncoat. But where could she turn for answers?

By the end of June, Margaret was beginning to regain some of her inborn self-reliance. Her logical mind attacked her problem from a less emotional angle. While the thought was frightening, she wondered whether Arthur might have had an accident out

on one of the forest trails. Had he perhaps drowned in the swollen Wiggins? She sought out Eli Farrar, who was said to be the only person who might have some idea what had happened to Arthur. Eli discounted her fears and turned her away with the same noncomittal answers he had given to everyone else.

"Miss Margaret, I don't think you should fret about Art having an accident. He knows these forest trails like the back of his hand and he never takes chances he don't need to. He went away all right—that much I'm sure of but he couldn't or wouldn't tell me what it was all about. When he shows up he'll have a good reason for not telling you or me or anybody else. Just you hang onto that thought. I know that boy. He loves you more than life itself and he'll come back to you sooner or later."

Eli's reassurances did little to ease the concern in Margaret's mind or the ache in her heart but there was no one else to whom she could turn. Obviously it would be futile to discuss the matter with her father. He's probably pleased that Arthur has disappeared, she thought. Since their first violent confrontation she and her father had maintained a truce during which each had avoided conversation as much as possible. Since Arthur's departure, however, Parkman's behavior had been exemplary. He had not gloated over Margaret's discomfiture and had, in ways unusual for him, given the impression that he was sorry to see her so unhappy. His voice was not quite as harsh when he chose to speak and his manner not quite as domineering. For her birthday he had presented her with an expensive necklace and a lovely fur cape selected by her cousin Sybill. Still, in spite of her father's changed attitude, Margaret knew instinctively that she could not discuss Arthur with him.

One afternoon, feeling the need to try something that might lead to the solution of her problem, Margaret climbed the hill to Arthur's cabin. She wandered aimlessly about the clearing, hoping to discover some clue that might explain why her man had gone away. At the edge of the woods she came upon the cross marking the grave where Arthur's father was buried. Tears filled her eyes. The wooden cross was still in place because Arthur had never made the trip to Norridgewock to bring back the headstone he had ordered. This is something I can do, she thought.

"Darling," she murmured brokenly, "your father's headstone will be put in place. I shall see to it."

I shall ask Mister Farrar to make the trip to Norridgewock and bring back the marker, she thought, and was immediately struck by the realization that she was acting as if Arthur was already her husband and she had a wife's right to make such a decision.

"And why not?" she muttered defensively. "Who has a better right than I do?"

Margaret continued her inspection of the grounds. Eli had made certain that a casual observer would find nothing to indicate that a crime had been committed. Margaret stepped inside the stable and noted only that the animals were gone, as reported by the villagers. She had not been inside the Saint-Pierre cabin since her school days but she was familiar with its interior, as was almost every youngster in the valley. The steep hill nearby was a favorite spot for winter sledding. When Arthur's father was at home there was always a blazing fire in the fireplace and any child was welcome to step inside the cabin to get warm and be treated to a lump of maple sugar. Memories of such carefree times were on Margaret's mind as she pushed open the cabin door and stepped inside a room that looked much the same as she remembered it. The Spartan simplicity of the furnishings sorted well with the virile men who owned them. Arthur's axes, with leather guards over the bits, were leaning against the wall by the back door. The lower bunk bed, neatly made up, was undisturbed save that one of Arthur's heavy jackets lay on the coverlet. The candelabrum on the deal table held the solidified remnants of burned-out candles. Two lanthorns hung on the pegs in the wall beside the fireplace in which there was a heap of cold grey ashes and the blackened stump of a partially burned log. The air in the room held a musty smell typical of the atmosphere inside a building that had been closed up for weeks. Margaret gazed sadly about the room that held so much that was associated with the man she loved—the room that was now as empty of warmth as her life. She sank into a chair by the table and pillowed her head on her arms.

"Oh Arthur, what has happened?" she whispered.

It was a warm day and Margaret had left the back door open.

She heard footsteps and Eli Farrar appeared at the open door.

"Mind if I come in, Miss Margaret?"

"Of course I don't mind, Mister Farrar," said Margaret with a faint smile. "You are always welcome. I'm sorry Arthur is not home just now. He will be back soon, I hope."

"Good!" said Eli heartily, falling in with Margaret's gentle attempt at the lighthearted approach. "Suppose I come in and set a spell. It's likely Art will show up before long."

Margaret could not follow through with the pretense.

"Oh, Mister Farrar, I wish I knew when. If Arthur had not been called away this would be my home now. As it is I have no right to be here."

Eli entered the room, turned a rocking chair to face the table and sat.

"Miss Margaret, there ain't nobody that has a better right than you, but some other folks besides me saw you climbing the hill and I guess you know tongues are going to start wagging."

"I considered that," said Margaret, "but I decided to come anyway. Whatever gossip I may have started cannot upset me more than I am already. I came here hoping to find some clue to Arthur's disappearance. If that bothers anyone I really don't care very much."

"Good for you!" said Eli. "Never let the busybodies get your goat! Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," said Margaret, "but I had to try. No one else is doing anything. Everyone seems to have accepted Arthur's absence as if nothing can or should be done about it."

"Seems that way, don't it?" said Eli. "Trouble is, nobody knows where to begin. All the same I have a feeling something will turn up before long. Just don't give up hope."

"Mister Farrar, I will never give up hope! Never, as long as I live!"

Eli swallowed hard and turned his head away. Margaret's pathetic, tearful declaration touched him deeply and he sat in tongue-tied silence until she regained her composure.

"Miss Margaret, I wish there was something I could do to help."

"Thank you, Mister Farrar," said Margaret. "I know you would do whatever you could for Arthur and for me. There is something you might not mind doing. Arthur ordered a headstone for his

father's grave but he never went to pick it up. I wish I could do that much for him but I know my father would never permit it. If you could spare the time, would you be willing to make the trip to Norridgewock and bring back the marker?"

"Of course," said Eli. "Glad you asked me. Art told me about the stone but I thought he'd already gone after it. Don't worry your head about it. It'll be no trouble at all. I can go next week, most likely."

Some of the villagers saw Margaret and the blacksmith walking down the bridle path from Arthur's cabin to the foot of the hill. As expected, there was talk but no one was brash enough to question Margaret. The nosy ones who mentioned the matter to Eli received a short answer.

"What we were doing up there is private business," said Eli with a tone of voice and look that suggested that it was none of the questioner's affair.

The most remarkable thing about the episode was that Winston Parkman never learned of his daughter's visit to Arthur's cabin. It was a measure of Parkman's popularity that all the valley residents, including the busybodies, maintained a conspiracy of silence, remarkable in a community where news usually traveled on winged feet.

Chapter 10

One possible reason why hope springs eternally is that so-called impossible situations are not always as hopeless as they at first appear. Solutions to very difficult problems have been known to turn up in unpredictable ways. All of which is to say that Cicero Nelson's love for strong drink was, for once, to serve a useful purpose.

"Dutch" Nelson, Cicero's father, owned and operated Wiggins Valley's grist mill, located on the river's eastern bank, downstream from Parkman's mill and south of the covered bridge. Dutch had diverted a portion of the river flow into a sluiceway from which water poured over a small waterwheel, providing power for the modest little mill. Dutch had never been overburdened with business but he seldom complained. He was a widower and father

to a giant lout of a son, known locally as "Booby-Hatch" Nelson, whose unlikely real name was Cicero. Childlike Cicero had been slighted when brains were alloted but he was built on massive lines and, when sober, was a good man with an axe. Between them, the Nelsons managed to live well enough, by their own standards. Dutch loved to play the bagpipe. Cicero loved to drink rum and overdid it, frequently.

The Wiggins Valley trading post was, by custom, the weekly Saturday night gathering place where stories were swapped and gossip aired. On one such Saturday evening, late in July, Eli Farrar and others were sitting about, listening to livery man Tom Hanson hold forth with a tale from his seemingly inexhaustible supply of tall stories. Cicero Nelson joined the group and sat down to listen. He had been drinking. Even at six paces the odor of demon rum was unmistakable. Cicero, when sober, had difficulty stringing words together intelligibly but, in his cups, he often became quite voluble. On this occasion, he said nothing until Hanson had finished his improbable narrative. He showed interest, however, when one of the other men began to talk of a trip he had taken down river and his return up the west-side trail.

"The old Wiggins sure raised hob with that trail, worsen't I've ever seen it. Why in some places the water washed holes as big as—."

"Should've come up the east trail," Cicero interrupted, "like me when I was down to Fort Western in May."

"What was you doing in Fort Western?" asked Eli in surprise. "You ain't never been that far away from home before."

"I was this time," insisted Cicero. "Mister Parkman had me to d'liver a letter and bring back an answer."

Eli's eyes narrowed. He questioned Nelson no further but resolved to get him alone and try to determine whether Cicero knew the nature of Parkman's correspondence. Farrar, after thoughtful consideration of the circumstances surrounding Arthur's probable abduction, had decided that Parkman must have had something to do with the boy's disappearance. The bully McKelvy had been eliminated as a suspect. Inquiry among the river men disclosed that McKelvy had beaten a man savagely in a Skowhegan tavern brawl and had been languishing in prison about the time that Arthur was returning from camp. Since

McKelvy was still imprisoned there was scant possibility of his having anything to do with Arthur's abduction. With McKelvy out of the picture Eli had taken to observing Parkman's behavior closely. Given Eli's suspicious state of mind, Cicero's letter-carrying trip rang an alarm bell in the mind of the blacksmith. He was curious to know why Margaret's father had chosen not to use the now well-established government postal service for delivery of a letter to Fort Western. Why had he chosen a private courier and why, of all people, had he picked Booby-Hatch Nelson?

Late in the evening, the Saturday night session broke up. Eli lingered in conversation with Ed Fairbrother until the other men had gone home—all save Cicero who had dozed off and was snoring lustily. Fairbrother stood with arms akimbo and shook his head as he looked at the slumbering giant.

"Poor Booby-Hatch!" he said. "Don't know's I blame him for being drunk half the time. Can't be he gets much pleasure out of life when almost everybody makes fun of him. What'll we do with him?"

"Let me wake him up," said Eli. "I'll walk him home. He ain't so all-fired drunk he can't make it."

"Come on boy! Time to go home! Ed wants to close up."

Eli had no problem in carrying out his plan to question Cicero. The big man liked and trusted the blacksmith. Farrar was one of the few men who did not enjoy taking advantage of the mentally incompetent and usually docile Nelson. Fairbrother stood on the steps of the trading post and chuckled as he watched Eli and Cicero weaving their way down the road toward the Nelson cabin. Eli had his arm around Cicero's waist. The big man who towered a foot taller than the blacksmith clung to Eli with a brawny arm laid across the shorter man's shoulders. The blacksmith walked with a limp and a stranger would doubtless have sworn that both men were inebriated.

"Cicero, he kept wanting to drift to starboard," Eli said later, "and I kept yanking him back to port!"

Long before arriving at the Nelson cabin Farrar, by judicious questioning, learned that Parkman's letter had been addressed to a man named Jared Blackman who operated a shipping business out of Fort Western. Cicero claimed to have no knowledge of

the nature of Parkman's message or the Blackman reply. To Eli the event seemed worth investigating.

On Sunday Eli conferred with Fairbrother privately.

"Ed, I'm going away for a few days. In case anybody asks, I've got an out-of-town job to do down river."

Fairbrother looked at Eli searchingly.

"What's up? You find out something?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," replied Eli. "I got a hunch, that's all. I better not tell you what it is because it may not amount to a tinker's dam. Talk to you about it when I get back."

Early on Monday morning, astride a horse rented from Tom Hanson, Eli left town by the east river trail and headed for Fort Western.

Fort Western was not officially the name of a town. Old-timers insisted on referring to the settlement as Fort Western when in reality it was first named Cushnoc by the Indians and would eventually become Augusta, the capital of Maine. Named after Thomas Western of Sussex, England, the great fort had been built, it was said, to guard the southern settlers from attacks by northern Indian tribes. Benedict Arnold and his men held a three-day feast there, in the shadow of the fort, in September of 1775, before starting on the ill-fated Quebec expedition. The feast, according to some reports, was an occasion for "eating like pigs," remarkable for the consumption of enormous quantities of bear meat, smoked salmon, and countless numbers of succulent pumpkin pies. For hundreds of Arnold's men, it was a farewell banquet the like of which they would never enjoy again. At Fort Western was born the legend of Jacataqua, alleged to have been a beautiful Indian queen, beloved of Aaron Burr.

Upon arrival at Fort Western, Eli was immediately aware that vigorous, almost feverish, building activity had been taking place. Buildings of hewn logs, in various stages of construction, lined both sides of the Kennebec River and the muddy streets leading out into the countryside. The better homes and places of business were constructed of sawed lumber. With settlers invading the territory in ever-increasing numbers, the demand for milled lumber was heavy. Fort Western was but one of many such settlements experiencing growing pains and the Parkman family had profited by being among the first to supply the requirements

of rapid expansion.

The business center of the settlement seemed to be concentrated along the western bank of the river. Eli crossed on a newly constructed bridge and asked directions to a livery stable where he left his horse and set out to find lodging. A short stroll down the street from the stable he came upon an ancient two-story hotel, a building that bore the architectural trappings of an earlier century. Nothing could have stopped Eli from entering the weather-beaten hostel. A sign over the ornate front door read, "Blackman Manor, Est. 1694."

Eli arranged for lodging and meals and asked to see the proprietor.

"I'm sorry, sir," said the clerk, "but Mr. Baxter is out of town today."

"Oh, so the owner's name ain't Blackman? Thought it might be," said Eli.

The clerk smiled indulgently.

"I'm afraid not, sir. No Blackman had owned his hotel for many years." Then, as an afterthought, the clerk added, "There is a Blackman in town. He has a shipping office down by the river."

"Is that so?" said Eli. "Might his first name be Jared?"

"Why yes," replied the clerk, "I believe it is. Are you acquainted with him?"

"Could be a cousin I ain't seen in years," lied Eli. "Believe I'll go see, if you'll tell me how to find his place."

Following the clerk's directions, Eli found a large sprawling building, south of the fort, with a sign over the front door which read, "Shipping Office, J. Blackman, Prop." The rear wall of the building rested on a long dock at the river's edge. Barely visible above the roof of the establishment was the tip of a ship's mast. Eli circled the south end of the one-story structure and saw that the mast was attached to a small shallow-draft sloop, tied up at the dock. A burly giant, wearing a beard fully as luxuriant as Eli's own, was standing on the dock while arguing in a harsh, gravelly voice with a short, thin-faced wisp of a man standing at the rail of the sloop.

The bearded one caught sight of Eli and scowled.

"What d'ya want, mister?" he growled.

Eli disliked the man instantly but answered him civilly enough.

"Looking for Jared Blackman. Is he around?"

"Mebbe he is and mebbe he ain't," replied the burly one. "What d'ya want with him?"

Irritated by the man's surliness Eli controlled his temper with difficulty.

"I'll tell him when I see him," he said evenly. "I asked you if he was here!"

The encounter might have turned into a shouting match or worse but at that moment one of the building's numerous back doors was flung open and an obviously angry fat man strode forth onto the dock.

"Cooley!" he barked, "Where the hell is that manifest? I'm still waiting!"

Catching sight of Eli the paunchy, overweight man stared at the blacksmith in an arrogant, unfriendly manner.

"Who might you be, Mister?" he snapped.

Eli knew instinctively that the man was Blackman. One look at the grossly obese body, the thick pouting lips, and the glitter of cold, pale blue eyes was enough to convince Eli that he was in the presence of a scoundrel unscrupulous enough to do anything for a price. The surly brute with the beard was the sort of hireling to be expected in the company of such a man. Eli had become convinced that Parkman was responsible for Arthur's abduction and these men were the type Margaret's father would be likely to hire if he wanted his daughter's suitor to be put away. Sensing that he was on the right track, Eli knew that if he was to learn anything useful he would have to proceed cautiously and try to outsmart Blackman. Taking the measure of the men before him he decided to meet truculence with truculence.

"You people are a hell of a lot handier at asking questions than you are at answering them!" said Eli in a hard voice. "Winston Parkman asked me to look up a man named Jared Blackman but if you're him I'm sorry I did!"

As Eli expected, at the mention of Parkman's name there was an immediate change in Blackman's attitude. His belligerent stare was suddenly half concealed by drooping eyelids that reduced his eyes to mere slits. He turned to his bearded underling.

"Mister Cooley, do we know anyone named Winston

Parkman?"

Cooley's hesitation was comical. He had not been properly coached and was uncertain of the answer he was expected to give. Eli's sharp eyes caught the almost imperceptible movement of Blackman's head, whereupon Cooley's face was split by a lopsided grin.

"No boss, we don't know nobody named Winston Parkman. No sir, never heard of him!"

You damned well know Parkman all right, thought Eli with grim satisfaction. Well now, Mister Fat Man, let's see if I can tickle your curiosity.

"Well, excuse me," said Eli, feigning an apologetic manner. "If you ain't acquainted with Mister Parkman I'm wasting my time and yours too." He looked directly at Blackman. "If you was Jared Blackman, you'd know who Winston Parkman is. Ain't no doubt about that, so I'll just have to look somewhere else. Must be someone in this town who knows where Blackman is."

Eli turned abruptly and started to walk away. Blackman's voice drifted after him.

"Suppose I could put you in touch with Blackman, what do you want with him?"

Eli paused and turned around angrily. His irritation was not entirely simulated.

"Mister, I don't see as that's any of your business! I already told what's-his-name there that I'd talk to Blackman when I see him. I swear, if you people are working for Blackman and I was him, I'd fire the both of you, and in particular that numskull who calls you 'boss'!"

Again Eli turned on his heel and walked away. That ought to stir up something, he thought. It did. Cooley snorted in anger, clenched his fists, and started to lurch forward in Eli's direction.

"Cooley! That's enough!" snapped Blackman. "Go help Bertie find that manifest. It has to be on board somewhere."

Cooley turned back reluctantly and leaped angrily onto the deck of the sloop. Eli kept going. He was disappointed that Blackman was allowing him to leave without further conversation.

By the time Eli had circled around to the front of the building, Blackman was standing at the open front door. Eli chuckled inwardly. He's fast on his feet for a fat man, he thought. Looks

like I got him hooked after all.

Blackman regarded the blacksmith with a still-icy stare, but his voice was ingratiating.

"Say, Mister What-ever-your-name-is, you're as touchy as a hedgehog. Now listen—I'm in charge here. If you'll just simmer down and come in the office perhaps I can help you."

Eli allowed himself to be mollified and followed Blackman inside to a small office containing an old desk littered with papers and ledger books. The whitewashed walls were hung with several excellent marine paintings, one of which depicted a large sloop under full sail. The bow was lettered "Grey Gull."

Blackman lowered his bulk into an oversized chair behind the desk and invited Eli to occupy a bench built against the wall across from the desk. Blackman was the first to start the conversation.

"I suppose I should apologize for your unfriendly reception, but lately we have been having trouble with robberies and I don't take kindly to strangers who might be sizing us up. You haven't said who you are and, excuse me, but you don't have the look of a prospective customer."

Then why are you bothering to talk to me, thought Eli—as if I didn't know!

"No," said Eli, simulating embarrassment, "guess I don't look much like a customer. And I ain't. I'm a blacksmith. Name's Eli Farrar. Been in the saddle all day and haven't taken the time to get cleaned up. But I still want to see Mister Blackman, personal."

Blackman wet his thick lips and fell to studying the clutter on his desk, as if to discover a clue to his next move. After a few moments of silence he seemed to have arrived at a decision. Peering at Eli through half-closed eyes he said, "I'm Blackman."

Eli forced himself to look surprised at the revelation.

"You're Blackman! Well, why in thunderation didn't you say so in the first place! Ain't no big secret, is it? We could have saved all this fooling around."

"Let's just say I have my own reasons," said Blackman coolly. "Now what leads you to think I know a man named Winston Parkman? You said he asked you to look me up."

"Mister Blackman, there ain't any doubt about your knowing

Parkman. I know, for instance, that a man named Nelson, who ain't exactly bright, delivered a letter from Parkmen to you back in May and took one of yours to him. You see, I work for Parkman myself."

Blackman's bloated, florid countenance lost color. He stared at Eli in consternation.

"You're mighty well informed about something that was supposed to be confidential. Do you also know the nature of our correspondence?"

"No sir," said Eli promptly. "Them letters was sealed—you know that. I don't get paid to stick my nose into Parkman's private business."

Blackman was visibly relieved, as Eli was quick to notice. The fat man settled back in his chair and again regarded Eli through half-closed eyes.

"Exactly what do you get paid for? I mean, what do you do for Parkman? I never heard your name mentioned as long as I've known him."

"Well, now, that ain't so surprising," said Eli. "I've worked for Mister Parkman, off and on, for something like fourteen years and I ain't never heard your name mentioned either, until this spring."

Never in his life had Eli been accused of being a devious man but he was learning fast. Parkman and Blackman were almost certainly involved with each other in some kind of activity they didn't want other people to know about. An idea had been taking shape slowly in Eli's mind. Blackman was, by all appearances, a rascal. He was also engaged in the shipping business, perhaps in overseas trade. For what purpose would Winston Parkman be dealing with such a man? To ship his lumber? Not likely. Fort Western was too far away from Wiggins Valley for that to be a practical arrangement. But suppose Parkman wanted Arthur to be shanghaied and put aboard a ship that would be at sea for months. That idea made sense to Eli. If Parkman wanted Arthur to be discredited in the eyes of his daughter he couldn't have selected a much better way to do it. Arthur had dropped from sight without a word of explanation to Margaret or anyone else, and if he were to be detained aboard a ship for a long period of time his promised bride could hardly be blamed for having doubts

about his reliability. Shanghaiing was common practice among unscrupulous shipmasters. Convinced that his reasoning was valid, Eli went about his probing for information in a roundabout manner.

"Say, Mister Blackman, is that one of your ships?" Eli pointed to the fine painting of the *Grey Gull.*

"Yes it is," said Blackman impatiently, "but what has that to do with your business here?"

"Maybe more than you might think," replied Eli. "You'll see what I'm getting at in a minute. That vessel don't look like no river boat, if you know what I mean."

"Of course it isn't," said Blackman. "The *Grey Gull* is one of my cargo ships for overseas trade. Matter of fact she's overdue back from Marseille right now."

"Uh-huh," said Eli. "Now that might explain a thing or two."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," said Blackman.

"You will in a minute," said Eli, still feeling his way cautiously. "Do you mind telling me if that ship went to Marseille last May, carrying some goods that Mister Parkman is interested in?"

"Yes, Parkman had a consignment on the *Gull* in May. He's one of my oldest customers," said Blackman glibly. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity, that's all, Mister Blackman," said Eli. "Most folks in Wiggins Valley would be surprised to know Parkman ships lumber overseas. As well as I know him I didn't know that. Now I understand what he meant by the message I'm supposed to give you—or ask you, I guess I mean."

"At last we arrive at the point of this conversation," said Blackman. "What message, if it's not too much trouble?"

"Well, Mister Blackman," said Eli, "Mister Parkman must be worried about his shipment. He said he hadn't heard from you since the ship sailed."

There was no way that Eli could know that he had overstepped himself. Amateur detective that he was, he had made one disastrous false assumption. Had he known Blackman better he might have been warned by the crafty smirk that overspread the fat man's face and the sudden lowering of his voice.

"He may be worried," said Blackman, "but there's no need for

concern. The *Gull* is only three weeks behind our estimated time of arrival and that is not at all unusual. In the first place we never know what weather conditions are out there. Second, bargaining in a foreign market never follows a precise time schedule. I'm surprised that Parkman put you to all this trouble. He could have written me a letter."

"Well, it was sort of accidental," said Eli. "I happened to mention that I was taking a trip down to Pittston so he asked me would I stop and see you. From what you say, it seems to me that Mister Parkman ain't got much to worry about. I expect when I come by on my way home I'll see the *Grey Gull* tied up here."

"Not at this dock," said Blackman, "She draws too much water to come this far up river. Only our shallow-draft coast runners tie up here."

Eli dared not continue to probe any further for information. He felt that he already knew enough to justify his assumption that Parkman's "consignment" aboard the Grey Gull was none other than Arthur Saint-Pierre, detained against his will. Blackman had said that the *Gull* was never brought up river so its berth was likely to be in Bath at the mouth of the Kennebec. The next logical step was to go down river and find out whether the port authorities knew anything about the *Grey Gull.*

"Mister Blackman, I won't take up any more of your time. I've got my answer for Mister Parkman so now I'll be getting along down to Pittson tomorrow morning. Used to live there years ago, I ain't exactly a stranger in these parts. Took up with Colonel Arnold here in seventy-five."

Blackman appeared to have lost interest in any further conversation so Eli shook his hand and left. As he headed back toward his hotel he reviewed the information Blackman had provided. Everything he had learned pointed to the conclusion that Parkman had ordered Arthur's shanghaiing.

"Damn his black heart!" muttered Eli. "I ain't going to let him get away with it! I'll find our where that ship docks and when she's in port somebody's going to be in trouble. The Maritime Board would like to know what's going on, I bet!"

After Eli's departure, Blackman sat for some time fingering his lower lip and reviewing his conversation with Farrar. He

looked up at the painting of the *Grey Gull* and scowled. The stupid clod, he thought, does he really think I don't know what he was fishing for?

Blackman called a conference with the bearded Cooley and Cooley's unlikely sidekick, an impish little east side Londoner named Bertie.

"We've got troubles," said Blackman. "That seedy looking stranger is Eli Farrar, a blacksmith from Wiggins Valley, who thinks he's a clever detective. He says Parkman sent him but he's a liar. He said Parkman told him he hadn't heard from me since the *Gull* put to sea last May. Parkman would never make such a statement to anyone. I told Parkman that he would not hear from me until the *Gull* was actually in port, so why would he say what Farrar claims he said? I don't believe this blacksmith works for Parkman. I think he's friend of the Frenchman and is trying to find out what happened to him. He sounds like a country clod but he's no fool. I felt uneasy about him from the first. Damn Parkman anyway! He should have come down here in person instead of sending that nitwit Nelson. Farrar probably learned about the letters from Nelson and that's how he tied me up with Parkman. Listen, I want this yokel put out of commission until I can talk to Parkman."

"I'd like to get a couple of minutes alone with him!" growled Cooley. "I'd fix him so's he'd never call me a numskull again!"

"You'll get your chance, Cooley," said Blackman. "He says he's going down to Pittston tomorrow but I'm sure he's heading for Bath to see if he can find out about the *Grey Gull*. I can't afford to have any more trouble with the Maritime Board. If that amateur detective goes beyond Pittston I want him stopped until I have a chance to talk with Parkman. This is Parkman's game and I'll be damned if I'm going to get in trouble with the port authorities over something I didn't want to do in the first place. The fancy price he's paying for the job is not enough to make up for losing our papers. Parkman told me that no one would worry very much if the Frenchman disappeared for a while, but Farrar is obviously worried enough to come snooping around. I wish now that I'd never let Parkman talk me into this. I'm not going to be nailed to the mast for kidnapping. I want Farrar stopped any way you can and if Parkman doesn't know how to

shut him up our blacksmith is going to meet with an accident and wind up floating in the bay!"

"What do you want us to do, boss?" asked Cooley.

Blackman wasted little time in arriving at a decision.

"Bertie, did you get a good look at him?"

"That I did, guvnor."

"All right. I want you to find out where he's staying tonight and get up early enough in the morning to see which way he goes when he leaves town. Cooley, get a skiff ready with the things you'll need. If Farrar heads for Pittston you and Bertie will go down river until you're below the town. Farrar may stay in Pittston for a while but I doubt it. He'll probably keep going toward Bath. Wait until he's well on his way. There are plenty of places along the trail where you can take him without being seen. It would be better to wait until after dark. Don't take any chances with him. Lay him out like you did the Frenchman. Take him to the warehouse in Long Reach and keep him there until I get in touch with Parkman. Cooley, you stay with him and Bertie, you come and tell me when you're finished."

Privately, Blackman told the little Englishman, "Bertie, I know you do the thinking for Cooley. Keep your wits about you. What you do will depend on what Farrar does. Don't let Cooley go off half-cocked. He's got a grudge against Farrar for calling him a numskull. Think you can keep your muscleman in line?"

"Not to worry, guv," said Bertie. "I can 'andle 'im."

Chapter 11

Events fell out more or less as Blackman had predicted. Eli stayed the night in Fort Western. Confident that he had obtained his information without arousing suspicion, he had no reason to think he would be watched or followed. He felt little compulsion to hurry on his way since the trip might well end in frustration. Blackman had said the *Gull* was overdue in port. What might that suggest? Lost at sea? Captured by pirates? Either disaster was possible. The ship-building centers of the new republic were floating hulls at a feverish pace. Experienced seamen were scarce. Ships manned by novices were frequently reported lost. Seizures

by privateers had become so common that there was talk of organizing a fleet of American privateers to teach the predators a lesson. Every time a ship was overdue wives, mothers, and sweethearts had good reason to be worried concerning the fate of their menfolk. Eli promised himself that if Parkman's abduction of Arthur should end in disaster he would devote the rest of his life in seeking enough proof of Parkman's villainy to send the arrogant Englishman to prison. So far, his efforts had produced only circumstantial evidence to support his theory—not much to go on but enough to strengthen Eli's belief that he was on the right track.

Unaware that his every move was observed furtively by Blackman's shifty little Englishman, Eli saddled up at dawn, crossed to the east side of the river, and headed for Pittston. A few hours later he was renewing acquaintances with old friends in the town where he had learned his trade. Meanwhile, Cooley and Bertie had gone downstream and were hiding out beside the trail, south of Pittston.

Cooley and Bertie waited all afternoon for Eli to put in an appearance. When he didn't show up Bertie decided they should proceed cautiously back up the trail toward Pittston. They almost ran into Eli but managed to spot him in time to avoid being discovered. Staying well away from the trail, they kept their quarry under surveillance until he stopped for the night. Bertie was elated to find that Farrar's horse had stepped in a woodchuck hole and come up lame, forcing Eli to stop and bed down. Their assignment would be more easily accomplished, as Blackman had suggested, if the blacksmith were sleeping. At Bertie's insistence, they waited until it was certain that Eli had lapsed into unconsciousness, evidenced by his loud snoring. Cooley, in spite of violent, angry objections from Bertie, fell upon Eli's supine form with the intention of subduing him by brute strength. Farrar, rudely awakened, reacted with the force of a steel spring suddenly released and Cooley found himself thrust aside.

"Cooley, you bleedin' ass!" yelled Bertie. "A tap on the noggin, I said! You'll never take 'im now!"

"Yeah? We'll see about that!" snarled Cooley and lunged at Eli who had struggled to his feet.

Cooley was surprisingly agile for a man of his bulk and no

quick for Eli, handicapped by his bad leg. Cooley closed in and clamped his great arms in a punishing bear hug around Eli's body. Exerting the crushing power of his brawny arms and shoulders, he soon had Eli gasping for breath. As the two men went stamping and weaving about, Eli managed to trip his assailant who fell backward to the ground with the blacksmith on top. Cooley hit the ground with enough force to loosen his murderous embrace. Eli got one arm free and began to grope around in the darkness for something to use as a weapon. He found one in the form of a stone about the size of his fist. He seized the rock and with desperate force brought it down hard on the top of Cooley's head. The bearded giant yelled in pain and relaxed his hold a little more. Aided by the slight advantage gained, Eli swung the stone again with all the strength acquired by hours of wielding a blacksmith's hammer. This time the vicious blow landed with a sickening thud on Cooley's temple. The big man went suddenly limp and his arms fell away. Eli, breathing hard, lay still for a moment before attempting to stand up. As he started to roll free of Cooley's body he felt a searing pain near his left shoulder. Bertie, knife in hand, had attacked Eli from behind with the intention of stabbing him in the back, but succeeded only in tearing the flesh in the upper part of the blacksmith's left arm. Thoroughly aroused, Eli swung around and lunged at Bertie's legs. He managed to seize the little man's ankles and topple him to the ground. Bertie fell heavily but managed to keep his knife firmly clutched in his right hand. Even as he lay on his back with Eli astride his body the angry little Englishman aimed a blow at Farrar's chest, only to find the wrist of his knife hand seized in the crushing grip of Eli's powerful fingers. One twisting squeeze of the blacksmith's big fist forced Bertie to drop the knife. Eli snatched it up and held the sharp blade within an inch of Bertie's throat.

"Now, you sneaking little rooster, you're going to talk or I'll slit your gullet!"

"Cooley!" screamed Bertie.

"Ain't no use your hollerin' for him," said Eli. "I ain't sure I didn't kill him! He may never wake up!"

In spite of the danger that had threatened him, Eli was grimly exultant. There could be only one reason Blackman had sent his

bully boys out to waylay him—he had not fooled Blackman with his story, but he had succeeded in making the fat man uneasy.

"Maybe I ain't much of a detective," said Eli, "but I scared the hell out of your boss! Come on, little man, start talking! What did Blackman do with Art Saint-Pierre?"

"'ow should I know?" whined Bertie.

Eli held out his left arm. The torn shoulder had bled profusely. Blood had run down the arm and Eli's fingers were wet from the flow. Even in the semidarkness the gore was plain to see.

"Take a look, you little weasel! That's my blood you're looking at and if you don't start talking I'm going to see the color of yours!"

"Daren't peach on the guv! 'E'd 'ave me 'orsewhipped!"

"So you're scared to tell on him! That means you got something to tell and if you ain't talking in ten seconds you'll get worse than a horsewhipping!"

Eli emphasized the point by pressing the flat of the knife blade against Bertie's prominent Adam's apple. Bertie began to blubber.

By means of judicious threats of bodily harm, now and then, Eli persuaded the terrified little Englishman to reveal the incredible details of Parkman's involvement with Blackman. As Eli had surmised, Margaret's father had indeed hired the rascally fat man to have Arthur shanghaied. Bertie swore that he and Cooley had delivered the Frenchman, bound, gagged, and blindfolded but unharmed, aboard the *Grey Gull* at dockside in Bath. Once he had committed himself, Bertie babbled on and on in a frenzied attempt to appease Eli who kept threatening to slit the little Cockney's throat. Eli learned for the first time that Parkman had a monetary interest in Blackman's business—was, in fact, his partner. The docking facility where the *Gull* tied up was jointly owned by Blackman and Parkman. Parkman was sole owner of the *Grey Gull* although it was registered in Blackman's name. According to Bertie, the company owned other vessels, coastwise runners, in which Parkman held a half interest. Blackman was sole owner of one other large sloop of the same tonnage as the *Grey Gull*. Parkman had been allowed to buy into the company in 1785, for the compelling reason that Blackman needed new capital to salvage what was left of his business. He had fallen upon lean times when all his lucrative government contracts had been cancelled. Bertie either didn't know or wouldn't say why

Blackman had lost his federal contracts and Eli wasn't interested enough to press the point. What he did learn was that a man named Abel Quinn was Parkman's personal agent and was responsible for whatever was to be done with Saint-Pierre. Quinn was aboard the *Gull* in a dual role. Not only was he in charge of the prisoner, but he was to use his expertise in bartering among the merchants in Marseille. The *Gull's* master was Captain Jeremiah Whitley, who had signed on the previous year and concerning whose background Bertie professed to know nothing. Whitley had been hired by Blackman, took his orders from him, and was not told who actually owned the *Gull*. All the arrangements had been made in a manner calculated to downplay Parkman's connection with the company as much as possible. Bertie said he and Cooley had been warned not to talk about Parkman or his interest in the business.

Satisfied that Bertie had revealed everything he knew, Eli, ignoring the pain in his lacerated shoulder, put the saddle back on his lame horse and went off down the trail with his mount limping along slowly behind him. Bereft of a weapon, Bertie was powerless to make any objection to Eli's departure. Cooley was still unconscious but alive and, as Farrar left, the cowed little Englishman was trying to revive the big man he had always relied upon for physical assistance.

The hour was late. The full moon, now directly overhead, sent enough light filtering through the trees to enable Farrar and his crippled horse to follow the trail with little trouble. Fortunately, for Eli, his wound was not critical. He had bled profusely at first—not enough to endanger his life but enough to weaken him. Held to a slow pace by his lame animal, Eli had covered a distance of perhaps two miles when he came upon a small settlement where there were several cabins along a side stream that emptied into the Kennebec. The only light showing from any of the buildings came from a small blacksmith shop where Eli found some men playing cards and fortifying themselves from the contents of a keg of rum. Eli explained that he had been waylaid but had managed to escape, suffering no more damage than his wounded shoulder. The men were solicitous and sympathetic—the blacksmith especially so when he learned that Eli was also a smithy. He took Farrar to his cabin, woke up his wife, saw that

Eli's shoulder was cleaned and bound up, then took him back to the blacksmith shop so he could sleep in a bunk there. He explained, sheepishly, that he had a bunk in his shop because if he came home after consuming too much rum his wife wouldn't let him in the house.

After a night's rest and a hearty breakfast, Eli was eager to be on his way. He arranged to be rowed across the Kennebec where he would continue his journey on foot. He left his crippled horse with one of the settlers who owned a team of work horses and agreed to keep Eli's mount until the animal either recovered or had to be destroyed.

In Bath, Eli went first to the local Maritime Board office and related all that had happened to him and Bertie's confession that linked Blackman to the abduction.

"Mister Farrar," said the chief of the board, "I do not doubt your story in any detail and I wish there was some way to prove this villainy against Blackman. He has an unsavory reputation that is well deserved. He has several times been accused of unethical dealings, but we could never persuade anyone to testify against him. He succeeded in duping government officials in the handling of his federal contracts for nearly a year, but eventually his cheating was discovered and he was dismissed as a government carrier. He is lucky that this Winston Parkman you speak of bought into his operations and enabled him to expand from coastwise shipping into overseas trade. In your case I'm afraid it would be your word against his. None of his men would give him away, I'm sure. No naval court could convict him unless you could produce witnesses to corroborate your accusations. We have no authority to try him for the civil offense of kidnapping, but we could invalidate his papers if we could prove a serious violation of maritime regulations. I am truly sorry that I can't be more encouraging."

"Well, sir," said Eli, "I ain't near as anxious to put the kibosh on that skunk Blackman as I am to get my young friend back safe and sound."

"I'll tell you what I will do," said the officer. "When the *Gull* docks I will insist on going aboard for a tour of inspection. If we find your friend under restraint the captain will have to justify keeping him in irons. We could probably force the captain to

release him. If you wish I will send you word when the ship returns to port. Incidentally, I wouldn't be overly concerned because the *Gull* is overdue. It will be some time yet before we could begin to think that the *Gull* might have been lost at sea or perhaps had fallen victim to the privateers who are operating in the Mediterranean. The ship may have been delayed in Marseille. They could have run into foul weather or could perhaps have been becalmed for a time. Blackman was right about the weather. We never know what's out there until someone returns to tell us."

Following directions given him by the officer, Eli found the Blackman-Parkman dock and warehouse but decided against making his presence known to anyone in the company office. There would be plenty of time for questioning Blackman's employees after the *Gull* docked and Arthur was found aboard.

Eli persuaded a livery man to sell him a horse. The animal had seen better days but appeared capable of carrying Eli back to Wiggins Valley. Forewarned by his experience with Blackman's hirelings, Eli made his return on the west side of the river. This time, he rode with a musket slung in his saddle holster and gave Fort Western a wide berth. He traveled unmolested and arrived home with little to show for his efforts save a wealth of information he couldn't verify, a sore shoulder, and a heavy heart.

After relating his findings to Fairbrother, Eli was not at all surprised to learn that Parkman had left town suddenly, presumably on a business trip.

"Yeah, I'll bet he left in a hurry!" said Eli. "I'd like to see his face when Blackman tells him what happened! Damn his soul! I wish I could prove what he's done to Art!"

Chapter 12

Eli and his confidants were appalled and outraged over Parkman's high-handed treatment of Arthur but agreed to temper their anger with caution. Until the *Gull* returned to port there was scant possibility of substantiating any accusation against Parkman. In addition there was Margaret's peace of mind to consider.

"She's got troubles enough," said Eli. "As far as I'm concerned,

the best thing we can do is to keep quiet for the time being. I certainly ain't going to tell her what a scalawag her father is!"

Rachel Fairbrother, out of loving concern for Margaret, raised a mild objection.

"Couldn't we at least ease her mind on one point? At the moment she doesn't know whether Arthur is dead or alive."

Eli pointed out the obvious.

"I hate to say it but neither do we. And how can we tell what we know without letting the cat out of the bag about her father?"

"I suppose you are right, Eli," said Rachel, "so I'll go along with whatever you men decide is best."

Hanson, Bonneau, and the Fairbrothers finally agreed to remain silent, at least until Eli received word that the *Gull* was back in port.

Parkman, in response to an urgent message from Blackman, had gone to Fort Western where a stormy discussion took place.

"You'd better find some way to keep that damned blacksmith from talking," said Blackman.

"Let him talk!" said Parkman with a bravado he didn't really feel. "No one in Wiggins Valley is going to believe I would resort to kidnapping. I have some standing in that settlement. The place would be nothing without me."

"Parkman," said Blackman, "I don't believe you know your valley people as well as you seem to think. You told me, for instance, that no one would worry very much if the Frenchman disappeared, but Farrar was worried enough to come snooping around with his cock-and-bull story! I don't give a hoot in hell what those people think of you! I'm concerned with how much of a stink Farrar could raise with the Maritime Board!"

"Nonsense!" said Parkman. "He can't prove a thing. Just tell me, who is going to come forward and support his accusations? Talk sense, man! You did a stupid thing by sending Cooley and the Cockney after Farrar. Until then he was just guessing. Even now there's no way he can prove that Bertie told him anything."

"You'd better be right," said Blackman, "because if you're not and the Board comes after me I'll be damned if I go down alone. I'll take you right along with me! I was a fool to let you talk me into this in the first place!"

"Come off it, Blackman!" said Parkman. "You wanted my

money as badly as I wanted to be rid of the half-breed."

What Parkman did not admit to Blackman was his fear that Farrar would decide to tell his experience with the Englishman to Margaret. It was essential that Margaret should believe that Saint-Pierre had deserted her, else the purpose of the abduction would be thwarted. Whether Margaret would believe what Farrar could tell her was a question Parkman could not answer with any assurance. Eli and his colleagues, by continuing to remain silent, had added to Parkman's apprehension. The threat of exposure hung over his head like a sword of Damocles, although the danger became less imminent as the weeks went by and the *Grey Gull* failed to return to port. Even the maritime authorities in Bath were pessimistic. Apparently the *Gull* had been added to a long list of ships lost at sea or seized by privateers.

Parkman went again to Fort Western for another meeting with Blackman.

"I never intended that the Frenchman should die or, which is worse, be taken by privateers. I only meant to have him disappear without a trace and have him kept out of sight long enough for my daughter to lose faith in him and become interested in someone of her own class."

"I know what you meant to do," said Blackman, "but now it looks as if Frenchy is gone for good. Personally, I think that's a good thing for both of us. Of course, if he never shows up it will mean that you've probably lost your ship."

"I don't care about that!" said Parkman. "I can buy another one. I'd gladly sacrifice more than a ship to keep the half-breed from ruining Margaret's life! His uncle ran off with my wife and I don't intend to let another Saint-Pierre do the same thing with my only daughter!"

"Fine!" said Blackman. "It was your idea so you live with it! But from now on we're sticking to the shipping business or you and I are going to part company."

Responding to the pricks of a guilty conscience, Parkman now began to play the indulgent parent in earnest. He offered to take Margaret on a trip to Boston. When she refused, he persuaded her to go with him to Norridgewock where he allowed her to select an expensive new wardrove. He suggested that she spend the rest of the summer with her cousin Sybil and enjoy some

relaxation before the start of the school year. Margaret did go away for two weeks, mainly because Sybil knew nothing about Arthur or his disappearance and would not smother her with sympathy as her well-meaning valley friends persisted in doing.

In September, Margaret embarked on her tour of duty as the settlement school teacher. The number of school-age children was growing constantly and Margaret soon found she had little time to brood over personal problems. She continued her voluntary duties as church organist and even took on an additional assignment. The relatively new Christian Church of Norridgewock had been presided over by a wonderfully devout man, Elder Caleb Lewis, a baptized Methodist. In the fall of 1787, at his own request, he had been replaced by a much younger, newly ordained minister. Elder Lewis, who had never seen the inside of a theological seminary, decided to try his hand at supporting himself and his wife by farming and do his preaching for the Lord without material compensation. He had visited Wiggins Valley, had fallen in love with it, and in 1788 had moved there, about three weeks after Arthur Saint-Pierre's disappearance. Inevitably, Elder Lewis became pastor of the settlement. One of his first improvements was the organization of Sunday School classes for the youngsters. The children clamored for their beloved Miss Parkman to teach them. Margaret accepted the additional assignment without a murmur and, thereafter, became the busiest young woman in the settlement.

"That rascal Winston Parkman doesn't deserve an angel like Margaret for a daughter!" Rachel Fairbrother commented to her husband when it was announced in church that Margaret was to be both a secular and religious instructress. Eli Farrar, shortly after his return from Bath, had expressed more or less the same sentiments to Hanson, the livery man, but he had done so in somewhat more colorful terms. On that occasion Eli had been trying to pay Hanson for the horse he had abandoned on the trip to Bath.

"Eli, I won't take your money," Hanson insisted. "I have the horse you rode home on."

"But he ain't worth the feed it will take to keep him," Eli objected.

"You let me worry about that," said Hanson. "It's worth it to

find out just what kind of a skunk Mister High-and-Mighty Parkman really is! But I wish we could tell the girl the truth."

"So do I!" said Eli. "Judas Priest, how I'd like to! It would be the most satisfying thing I've ever done if I could expose that old hypocrite but if I told Miss Margaret what I know there'd be the Old Harry to pay! I don't even want to think about what would happen between her and her old man! And I still think it is better to let the girl wonder when Art's going to show up than to set her to thinking maybe he ain't never going to—which we ain't sure of yet!"

Throughout the fall and winter months Margaret appeared to have accepted as fact that Arthur's return was, at best, doubtful. Publicly she presented such a convincing air of acceptance that Eli and the others began to question the wisdom of ever upsetting her by revealing the truth. If she believed what they could tell her she would most certainly be shamed by her father's guilt, as well as overcome with grief at the prospect of never seeing Arthur again. Not one of the four conspirators wanted to subject Margaret to that much anguish.

Margaret had become the darling of the valley. She was wonderful with the children and innovative in her approach to teaching. She continued her charitable visits, undertaken with no slightest hint of condescension. In marked contrast to her snobbish father, she was solicitous and friendly toward upper and lower Valleyites alike. One of the women of the town who had known Margaret's mother, was heard to remark, "God love her, she takes after Abbie. I don't understand that Arthur Saint-Pierre. I don't for the life of me see how he could go off and leave that poor girl wondering what's become of him! It'd serve him right if she up and married someone else!"

Such anti-Saint-Pierre sentiments were rarely expressed among the townspeople but were heard often enough to strike fire in the mind of Parkman's disgruntled housekeeper, Fidelia Gooch. Arthur's defection had been a great disappointment. As the months went by and she observed Parkman's markedly improved relations with his daughter Fidelia knew her hope of benefitting from Parkman's wealth might never be realized. For her scheme to work Arthur would have to return and claim Margaret for his bride against her father's wishes. The ambitious Mrs. Gooch was

not one to abandon a dream without a struggle. She could not believe that Arthur intended to stay away indefinitely. She took to spending an unusual amount of time reviewing the little that was known about his disappearance. The conclusions she reached were to have an unforseen effect on future events.

Eli Farrar was acquainted with Fidelia Gooch by little save reputation. He had never, as he said later, spoken more than a half dozen words to her in his life. He was understandably amazed when she walked into his shop one afternoon and addressed him in a manner she usually reserved for the Parkman hired help.

"Eli Farrar, I'm going to ask you a question and I want an honest answer!"

Eli's jaw dropped along with a piece of metal he had been holding in his tongs. As he said later, he didn't know whether to "laugh or what." What he did was assume an air of wounded pride.

"Well now, ma'am," he said, "I ain't in the habit of telling lies!"

"I hope not," said Mrs. Gooch, "because I want you to tell me exactly how much you know about Arthur Saint-Pierre's disappearance!"

Caught off guard, Eli's face betrayed him. With Mrs. Gooch watching him closely he could feel the color rising in his cheeks and cursed himself for being unprepared. He turned away and picked up the piece of metal he had dropped. He always thought more clearly when his hands were busy. His silence lasted so long that Mrs. Gooch, satisfied that she had hit a tender spot, began to smirk in annoying fashion.

"Well, what about it?" she snapped.

"Ma'am," said Eli finally, "why are you asking me such a question now? That boy's been gone most a year. Don't you suppose I'd have spread it around if I knew anything worth telling? Who told you to talk to me?"

"Nobody!" replied Mrs. Gooch. "And don't try to put me off! You should have seen your face just now! Eli Farrar, you're hiding something and I want to know what it is! It's taken me a long time to get around to you and I don't know why I didn't think of you before. I might have known that Saint-Pierre's best friend would move heaven and earth to find out what happened to his boy. You know something you haven't told Margaret Parkman

and you ought to be ashamed of yourself for not telling her!"

Eli was still nonplussed. He stared at Mrs. Gooch while he strove to collect his thoughts. His gaze took in her spare figure, her severe ground-length dark dress, her sober pinched features, her sharp eyes behind steel-rimmed spectacles, and her abundance of greying hair piled high and topped with a wide-brimmed black straw hat held in place by a hat pin. This woman wasn't easy to figure out. Was she just guessing? He couldn't believe that any of the others would have talked to, of all people, Parkman's housekeeper.

Mrs. Gooch grew uncomfortable beneath Eli's prolonged, quizzical scrutiny.

"Well!" she said acidly. "You act as if you had never seen me before! If you are through taking stock you may remember I asked you a question!"

Having allowed himself time to recover from Mrs. Gooch's verbal attack, Eli posed a question of his own.

"Ma'am, tell me something. Saying I was smart enough to figure out what happened to the boy, which I ain't, why would you, of all people, want me to tell the girl? You must know your boss is tickled to death that Art's gone and you ain't never been friendly with the Saint-Pierres. I don't understand."

"I'm not asking you to understand!" said Mrs. Gooch tartly. "I'm asking you to tell me what you know!"

"Ma'am, if I knew something that would make that poor girl feel better I'd tell in a minute. But you are right about one thing. I'd take a stab at moving heaven and earth if it'd do any good. I think as much of that boy as if he was mine."

Mrs. Gooch appeared to wilt a little.

"Are you saying you really don't know what happened to Arthur?"

"That's right," said Eli, "and I don't know how to find out."

"Then you don't know whether he's dead or alive?"

"No ma'am, I don't and I wish I did."

Eli was vastly relieved when Mrs. Gooch finally appeared to accept his statements and left.

"Don't know what I'd have done," he told Fairbrother later, "if she'd have asked me if I knew why Arthur left so sudden. Guess I'd have just had to lie to her. I don't trust that skinny

old hatchet face. What's she after anyway? Do you suppose Parkman put her up to seeing if I'd talk?"

"No, I don't think so," said Fairbrother. "Rachel told me that Margaret said the Gooch woman was real nice to her just before Arthur left. That sounds as if the old girl wouldn't mind seeing Margaret married and out of the house. She knows, like every other woman in the valley, that Margaret and Arthur were in love. Seems to me if she didn't want them married she wouldn't care a damn where Arthur went or whether he's coming back."

"Maybe you're right," said Eli. "Anyway I didn't exactly lie to her. I just didn't tell the whole story and I think she swallowed it."

Eli was wrong. Mrs. Gooch had only pretended to accept his story. She kept remembering his noticeable discomfiture when she had first addressed him and gave him credit for being as devious as she was herself.

One Saturday morning Margaret was about to leave for a visit with Rachel Fairbrother when Mrs. Gooch called her into the kitchen. With characteristic bluntness she startled Margaret by saying, "If you want to know what happened to your Arthur, you better go talk to Eli Farrar!"

Margaret's face went white. As if reeling from a physical blow, she grasped the back of a kitchen chair for support and tears filled her eyes.

"What do you mean?" she said in a strained voice that went up the scale with every word. "Does Mister Farrar know what happened to Arthur?"

Not a little conscience stricken at the effect of her words, Mrs. Gooch put a steadying hand on Margaret's shoulder and assisted her to sit down.

"For Heaven's sake, girl, don't go all to pieces! I didn't intend to scare you to death! I simply meant you ought to talk to that blacksmith and make him tell you what he knows."

"I'm all right," said Margaret in a calmer voice. "I was just not prepared, after all these months! Are you saying that Mister Farrar actually has news of Arthur?"

"Now don't put words in my mouth," said Mrs. Gooch. "I didn't say any such thing. But he knows more than he's ever told around."

"How can you be sure of that?" asked Margaret skeptically.

"Because I accused him of it, and you should have seen his face!" was Mrs. Gooch's astounding reply. "He acted like a little brat caught in a lie!"

"You accused him of it!" echoed Margaret in astonishment. "Why?"

Mrs. Gooch misunderstood the question.

"Because it didn't make sense that he wouldn't break his neck to find out what happened to Arthur. He and Arthur's father were thicker than thieves. It's taken me all this time to realize that the one person in the valley who would move heaven and earth to find out what happened to Saint-Pierre's boy is Eli Farrar. And I'm right! He knows something he's never told anyone!"

"Perhaps you are right," said Margaret, but that's not what I meant. I mean why should you help me where Arthur is concerned? I thought you agreed with my father."

"I know what you thought," said Mrs. Gooch, "but you never asked me, did you? I'm not as big a fool as your father. I knew you and Arthur would make a match of it, sooner or later—and I was never against it."

"Oh, Mrs. Gooch!" said Margaret. She arose and for the first time in her life embraced the woman she had never been able to trust completely. The assault on her emotions brought tears to her eyes.

The housekeeper's face was expressionless but there was a hint of moisture in her eyes.

"Come now, girl," she said, "this won't help. Are you going to see Farrar?"

Margaret stepped back and smiled through her tears.

"Mrs. Gooch," she said, "you're an old fraud! And I never knew! Of course I'm going—right now!"

As Margaret hurried out of the kitchen the housekeeper's enigmatic gaze followed her. Kindliness and avarice are strange bedfellows.

"Margaret Parkman," she said under her breath, "you'll never know how big a fraud I really am!"

Chapter 13

Margaret found the blacksmith shop empty and hurried over to Hanson's livery stable.

"Mister Hanson, do you happen to know where I can find Mister Farrar? He's not in his shop."

"Yes, I know, Miss Parkman. He went up to the north end to sweat on a couple of wheel shoes. I expect he'll be back pretty soon."

"Oh dear!" said Margaret. "I especially wanted to see him right away! Thank you, Mister Hanson. I'll go visit with Mrs. Fairbrother and come back later."

As he watched Margaret head back toward the trading post Hanson fingered his lower lip speculatively. The girl was obviously upset about something. He wondered what that might mean and whether he ought to warn Eli that possible trouble was heading his way.

The Fairbrother cabin was situated some distance back from the rear of the main post building. A courtyard in front of the cabin was ringed with flower beds which, later in the season, would come to life with wild pansies, twinflowers, hepaticas, purple foxglove, white violets, and other flowering perennials that Rachel Fairbrother had painstakingly transplanted from their natural settings in the forest and along the river trails. As Margaret crossed the courtyard, she reflected sadly that the barren flower beds were as devoid of beauty as her life had been during the year that Arthur had been gone. Still, hope, like the perennials, had not died, nor would it ever. In her heart she thanked Mrs. Gooch for the remarkable encounter with Eli Farrar and the conclusions drawn from it.

Margaret found Rachel at work in the kitchen. Mrs. Fairbrother peered at her through spectacles with very thick lenses. The Norridgewock optician knew but one way to correct faulty eyesight—make the lenses increasingly thicker. Rachel had cataracts in both eyes and would become slowly but inevitably blind.

"Hello, dear," said Rachel. "Come and sit while I finish this pie. I'm using up the last of the mincemeat I put up last fall. Ed loves mince pie."

Rachel chattered on about local affairs and questioned Margaret on the accomplishments of the schoolchildren. After a time she realized that she was doing most of the talking and said so.

"I'm certainly a chatterbox this morning! Perhaps if I'd keep quiet you might want to tell me what is on your mind. If I may say so, you're a bit of a sobersides this morning. Is there anything troubling you that I should know?"

"I'd like to ask your opinion about something," said Margaret. "Just before I left the house this morning Mrs. Gooch told me that if I wanted to know what happened to Arthur I ought to go talk to Mister Farrar. What do you think of that?"

Rachel's initial reaction was shocked silence. She had come to believe, along with others in the valley, that Margaret had resigned herself to a future without Arthur. The note of eagerness in Margaret's voice told her that the girl was far from being resigned. Mrs. Fairbrother had never been fully convinced of the wisdom of withholding the truth. She was so fond of Margaret that it distressed her very deeply to participate in what she deemed to be a cruel deceit. Her next reaction to Margaret's words was a feeling of relief. Eli would undoubtedly find it impossible to remain silent any longer. Dealing with an eager, heartsick girl would be entirely different than his sparring match with Mrs. Gooch. Rachel, in her wisdom, was careful not to encourage Margaret's all-too-evident feeling of anticipation. In no case could there be anything but consternation in store for Winston Parkman's long-suffering daughter.

"Oh dear!" said Rachel. "No wonder you are upset! What in the world could Mrs. Gooch have heard that would lead her to say a thing like that!"

"She says she heard nothing from anybody," replied Margaret. "She says she came to the conclusion, all by herself, that Mister Farrar knows something he has never told. And then, of all things, she went to his shop and accused him of it! Can you imagine her doing a thing like that! She says he acted like a little boy who had been caught in a lie! Do you suppose he really does know something?"

Rachel, knowing only too well the extent of Eli's knowledge, was tempted to explain the conspiracy of silence. Her heart ached for the girl whose unscrupulous father had given her such a heavy

cross to bear. Only her promise to Eli kept Rachel from telling Margaret the sordid story of Parkman's cruelty.

"Margaret, my dear," said Rachel, "of course you must try to satisfy yourself whether or not Mrs. Gooch was right. I hope you will not be disappointed."

Margaret smiled wanly.

"What could be worse than the uncertainty I've had to live with? If I just knew why Arthur went away! We had such plans!"

"I know, dear," said Rachel. She wiped flour from her hands and sat beside Margaret. "I wish I could help. In a way, you're my little girl. I couldn't love you more if you were my own daughter."

"And I love you, dear lady," said Margaret and kissed Rachel's cheek. "I am grateful that you have been like a mother to me. I have never been afraid to confide in you, which is more than I can say of any other person except Arthur. You'll never know what your kindness and understanding has meant to me this past year. I know you would help now if you could but this is something I must face by myself, no matter how it turns out."

As Margaret prepared to leave she said, "I'll admit that I'm almost afraid to talk to Mister Farrar, but whatever I learn cannot be worse than knowing nothing at all."

Rachel watched the door close behind Margaret and said softly, "Sometimes not knowing is better."

The burden of knowledge concerning Arthur's abduction had never been borne comfortably on Eli's shoulders. With the passage of time it had become almost a certainty that Arthur would never be able to return. Eli had begun to question his decision to withhold the truth about Arthur's disappearance. Was it morally right to allow Margaret to spend the rest of her life thinking she had been deliberately abandoned by the man she loved? At the same time, it would be almost impossible to ease her mind on that score without precipitating a bitter clash between daughter and father. The problem troubled Eli deeply. To add to his self-doubt had come the startling encounter with the suspicious Fidelia Gooch. It had left him with a feeling of uneasiness and plagued by the possibility that the acid-tongued housekeeper had not been convinced that he knew no more than what he had told her. Consequently when Margaret Parkman, for the first time in

many months, appeared at the door of his shop, her presence was like a warning bell. Common sense told him that Margaret's visit would have been prompted by advice from Mrs. Gooch. Confound that woman, he thought and sighed. This wasn't going to be easy.

"Well, well, Miss Margaret," he said, "it's been quite a spell since you've been to my dirty old shop. Come in, if you can get in."

He pulled a small bench from under his work table and covered its surface with his jacket so that Margaret could sit without soiling her dress.

There was an awkward silence as both searched for words with which to open the conversation.

Eli found his tongue first.

"Miss Margaret, I have a feeling this ain't exactly a business call."

"No, Mister Farrar," said Margaret with a faint smile, "it is certainly not that. Now that I am here I'm almost afraid to tell you why. Perhaps the best way to explain is to repeat a remarkable statement that Mrs. Gooch made to me this morning. She said if I wanted to know what became of Arthur I should talk to you!"

Eli had already decided not to prolong the agony.

"Miss Margaret, I ain't going to beat about the bush. I told Mrs. Gooch I didn't know what had become of Arthur and I don't. That's the gospel truth. I can see now that she still thinks I know more than what I told her. Well, I do, but I wasn't going to say so to her. Art told me she never liked him any more than your father does, so I couldn't figure out what she was up to. What I didn't tell her is that Art didn't just up and walk away on his own. I could have told you that when I first talked with you but I kept hoping he'd turn up sooner or later and tell you himself."

"I don't understand," said Margaret. "Are you saying that he was forced to leave?"

"I'm saying he was taken away. Miss Margaret, did you ever hear tell of a man being shanghaied?"

"Yes, I know what shanghaiing means. Are you trying to tell me that Arthur was shanghaied—in this day and age!"

"I ain't just trying! I know it! I found out who the two men were that did it and made one of them talk!"

Margaret's eyes filled with tears. She sat bolt upright with

hands clasped tightly in her lap and stared up at Eli in such a pitiable manner that he turned his head away in embarrassment.

"Then—then you must know the ship to which he was taken," said Margaret brokenly.

"I do," said Eli gruffly, "but the hell of it is nobody knows where the ship is now! Excuse me! I didn't mean to swear but I start to boil every time I think of the skunks who did this!"

Margaret dried her eyes on a tiny wisp of handkerchief.

"It would help if I could get angry enough to swear instead of carrying on like a baby. A lot of good that does! Mister Farrar, please tell me all you know about this terrible thing."

"All right," said Eli, "but I'm afraid it ain't going to be much comfort to you."

"Mister Farrar you can't imagine what a relief it is to know that Arthur didn't deliberately run away! I—."

"Aw, Miss Margaret," interrupted Eli, "Art'd never do that! I've known that boy since he was twelve years old and he ain't afraid of anything. He'd never run away—especially from you. He was head over teakettle in love with you. Don't you know that?"

"Mister Farrar, if I didn't believe that I would never have agreed to marry him. But I didn't know what to think when he disappeared suddenly without a word of explanation. I was even blaming myself for having driven him away by letting him know how eager I was to be his wife. I am not skilled in such things."

"Well, now you know," said Eli. "It wasn't your fault and it wasn't Art's fault either."

Since he had promised to tell Margaret everything he knew about the abduction Eli now proceeded to fabricate what he hoped was a plausible tale, laced with as much truth as possible, without disclosing Parkman's part in the affair. The roles played by Cicero Nelson and Jared Blackman were never mentioned. Eli told in detail of his search of the Saint-Pierre property that turned up signs that pointed to the possibility of foul play. He professed to know only names of the men who had seized Arthur and the names of the ship and its captain. As Eli intended, Margaret was left with the impression that Captain Whitley had ordered Arthur's abduction for the purpose of augmenting his crew.

"I didn't realize that such terrible things were still taking

place," said Margaret.

"Oh yes," said Eli. "If the word gets out that such and such a captain is a skunk to serve under, the only way he can get a full crew is to shanghai the men he needs."

Eli was feeling relieved that he had lied his way out of a difficult situation, only to find that his ordeal was not yet over. Margaret now pressed him to tell her how he happened to discover the indentity of the two men who abducted Arthur. Fortunately he was prepared for the question.

"Just dumb luck, Miss Margaret. You probably don't know I went down river last summer. Went down to Bath, thinking I might run onto something. I had a hunch that Art had been shanghaied so I started hanging around in a couple of them waterfront barrooms. As luck would have it, in the second place I went into, there was that little rooster of an Englishman and his overgrown partner hanging over the bar. They were both pretty drunk, especially the big lummox. He wasn't saying much but the little Cockney was bragging about how he and his pal had been paid to shanghai a young Frenchman. He made out like it was a big joke that a Frenchman would have to serve aboard an English seacaptain's ship, whether he wanted to or not. Well, to make a long story short, I waited until them two fellers left the barroom and headed for the docks before I made my move. I had a little trouble with the big man but he was so drunk that with a bit of persuading he laid down and went to sleep. The weasel came after me with a knife but he wasn't much trouble either, being so drunk and all. I remember threatening to cut his throat unless he told me who the Frenchman was and what they had done with him. Turned out to be Art, of course. The little rooster swore they hadn't harmed him—just put him aboard Whitley's ship. I went to see the harbor authorities and they told me there was nothing they could do until the ship came back to port. They said I shouldn't worry because the ship was overdue. That's what they said then, but now they've changed their tune. Now they think the *Gull* has been lost at sea. That's why I said this story wasn't going to be much comfort to you."

As Eli told the Fairbrothers later, his fairy tale wasn't exactly a masterpiece but it had satisfied his purpose of absolving Arthur from blame without revealing Parkman's guilt.

"I just couldn't tell her that her father was responsible for sending Art to his death," said Eli. "What good would that do? We ain't likely to see the boy again, so what's the sense in starting a war between the girl and her old man, even if he is a rotten egg! I lied like a trouper, which is something I hardly ever do, but I'd do it again if it'd save that poor girl from feeling any worse than she does already. There ain't a chance in a million that Art's still alive. I know that boy and if he was still in the land of the living he'd have found a way to get home by now."

"Unless he's been picked up by pirates and sent to a galley," said Ed.

"Oh Lord, I hope not," said Eli. "That's worse'n being dead. They make you pull an oar until you die and then they throw you overboard!"

Chapter 14

Margaret's interview with Farrar, while reassuring her of Arthur's devotion, had dealt a shattering blow to her hope of learning something definite concerning his whereabouts. Grief-stricken, she had gone straight home, had refused to talk with Mrs. Gooch, and had shut herself away in her room. Eli's recital of the abduction had robbed her of any reasonable expectation that she would ever see Arthur again. Now, she must come to grips with the sad prospect of life without him. Her grief was the more poignant because she now knew that he had loved her until the end. With eyes nearly blinded by tears, she read again and again the words of his only love letter, the only tangible evidence of his devotion she would ever have.

Sunday morning, Margaret pleaded a splitting headache and stayed home from church. Mrs. Gooch was consumed with curiosity but found no opportunity to satisfy it. After Parkman and the housekeeper had gone to church, Margaret sat by the window and gazed in somber silence at the familiar view of the valley. The sky was obscured by clouds as grey and depressing as the thoughts that occupied her mind. She had gone to her meeting with Farrar believing, as she had told Rachel, that anything she might learn would be better than uncertainty. Now she was face

to face with the prospect of life without the only man she had ever loved. She would always wonder how he had met his death. There was no escape from the conclusion that Arthur was lost to her forever and hopelessness and despondency threatened to overwhelm her. Yet, despite her despair, it was characteristic of her to attempt fighting back. Her inherited Parkman valiance, combined with the resilience of youth, enabled her to gradually regain some measure of control over her emotions and restore clarity to her thinking. With the typical thoroughness of the fine schoolteacher that she was she undertook to review, point by point, the bizarre sequence of events that Eli, with the best of intentions, had described so convincingly. Her logical mind searched for a false note in Eli's story and eventually she found one. It seemed remarkable that Captain Whitley had sent his men so far afield in search of a man to shanghai. Why? Bath was more than eighty-five miles south of Wiggins Valley. Shanghaiing, by all reports of that skullduggery, usually took place in such places as waterfront barrooms or shabby lodging houses near the docks. It began to look as if Whitley had ordered his men to seek out and seize Arthur specifically. Or could it be that Eli had overlooked the possibility that someone other than the captain had ordered the abduction? Eli had not said precisely that Whitley had ordered Arthur taken. That was merely the impression that she had taken away after listening to Farrar's story. Athur's life was an open book to almost everyone in Wiggins Valley. It was not possible that she, who knew him better than anyone else, would not have been aware of his enemies—especially one with enough influence to have him shanghaied. The only answer that made sense was that someone had paid the rascally captain for his part in the crime. And that someone had to hate Arthur enough to plot his removal and wealthy enough to corrupt the people required to accomplish it, and she was suddenly aghast at the conclusion to which her reasoning had led her.

Margaret jumped from her chair and spat out the words, "My father! My father could have done this terrible thing!"

A jumble of thoughts raced through her mind. She thought she understood, at last, why her father had never referred to Arthur's disappearance, had never even taunted her for misplaced faith in the man who had deserted her, and who had treated her

with uncharacteristic gentleness and consideration ever since Arthur's departure. If he is guilty, she thought, what a hypocrite he is to be sitting in church at this very moment! She was conscious of a desperate urge to talk with Eli Farrar again. He was the one person who might be able to confirm her conclusion that her father was probably the culprit who had engineered Arthur's abduction and death.

Margaret knew that Eli never went to church, but in order to reach his cabin she would have to pass by the schoolhouse where church services were in progress. There was another way, however, and twenty minutes later Margaret was hurrying, on foot, up the west side of the river. To avoid being seen she stayed well back from the riverbank, where there was a faintly defined path that she and Arthur had used in their childhood days. Abandoned in recent years, it was overgrown in places where the forest had sought to regain its own. She experienced a tug at her heart each time she passed a spot where she and Arthur had played when their childish world had been uncomplicated. The path led into the horse trail circling the Parkman property and leading to the hanging bridge. Following this circuitous route, Margaret crossed the river and the north road without being seen.

Eli came to the door in response to Margaret's knock and immediately stepped back out of sight.

"Excuse me a minute, Miss Margaret," he said. "I ain't exactly dressed for company."

Eli's customary Sunday dress consisted of a pair of pants held up by galluses over his long-sleeved underwear, no shirt or jacket, and stockinged feet with no boots.

His deshabille corrected by donning a jacket and boots, Eli again came to the door and invited Margaret in.

"Well, young lady! Two visits in two days. That's something that don't happen very often."

"Which is more to my shame," said Margaret soberly. "Next to Rachel Fairbrother, you're the best friend I have in the valley. Who else would have made the effort you did to find out what happened to Arthur. And here I am again to burden you with still another problem."

"Problem?" said Eli. "Don't tell me you got more troubles."

"I'm afraid it's part of what we discussed yesterday," said

Margaret. "I may as well tell you that I think my father hired Captain Whitley to take Arthur away."

"Great Scott, girl! How'd you get around to thinking that?"

Thereupon, to Eli's dismay, Margaret reviewed her all too accurate line of reasoning that laid the burden of guilt on her father's shoulders.

By the time Margaret had finished Eli sat shaking his head in chagrin.

"Miss Margaret, are you dead set on believing your father would do such a thing?"

"How can I believe otherwise?" said Margaret, frowning. "Arthur has no enemies except my father. Certainly none powerful enough or ruthless enough to send him to his death!"

Eli was still careful not to say that he agreed with her reasoning.

"We don't know for sure that he's dead," he said in a voice that lacked conviction.

"After all this time!" said Margaret. "Do you honestly think he is still alive?"

"If pirates took that ship, he could still be alive," said Eli.

"As a galley slave! Oh no! I don't want to think that! I've been told that no one ever escapes from such slavery. It would be more merciful if Arthur were lost at sea and you said that the harbor authorities in Bath think that is what happened."

"Miss Margaret, I don't know what to say. What're you going to do about your father, since you're so set on thinking he's guilty?"

Margaret looked squarely at Eli. There was an angry spot of red in each of her cheeks and her eyes blazed with Parkman temper.

"I'm going to find out what he has to say for himself! And, father or no father, I will not live in the same house with a man so lost to a sense of decency that he can manipulate the lives of other people as he has done! There can be no justification for what he has done. It is so monstrous! How can he sit in church and pray! I should think the words would choke him!"

"Miss Margaret, I wish I could talk you out of this," said Eli. "It's such an awful thing for a daughter to feel the way you do about your father."

"Anyone who can do such a terrible thing is no father of mine!" said Margaret angrily. "Mister Farrar, you haven't said you agree

with me but I think you know I am right."

There was nothing more Eli could bring himself to say. He stood in hangdog, embarrassed silence as Margaret took her leave.

"Some liar, I am!" Eli told Fairbrother later. "I couldn't fool Blackman. I couldn't fool old lady Gooch. I couldn't fool the girl and now there's hell to pay! Damn Parkman, anyway! Monty's probably turning over in his grave to see what a stinker his son has turned out to be!"

Chapter 15

Margaret was in no hurry to return home from her interview with Farrar. She made her way north to the hanging bridge and crossed the river, then followed the bridle path all the way around the Parkman property and came out onto the Norridgewock road about a half mile west of her house. It was a long walk and afforded her time to sort her confused thoughts. She understood Eli's reluctance to agree with her conclusions about her father and knew that he was not in favor of her planned confrontation. But Eli had not disputed her indictment and, in her mind, his silence was as good as an admission that she was right. Her father hated Arthur—of that there was no question. She remembered the night, a year gone, when her father's hysterical outburst had revealed the venomous side of his nature. Adding to her revulsion was his brazen display of hypocrisy. It was this aspect of his behavior that added strength to her determination to confront him and try to trap him into an admission of guilt. Parkman himself would have admired the deviousness of his daughter's plan of entrapment.

It was a long-standing custom in the Parkman household that only two meals would be served on Sunday. Margaret arrived home just in time for the early evening meal.

"We were worried about you, daughter," said Parkman. "Where have you been all afternoon?"

"I'm sorry," said Margaret pretending to be properly contrite. "I should have left a note. I thought a long walk would help me get rid of my headache. Before I realized how far I had gone I was all the way over to the Davidsons'. As usual, we talked and

the time just slipped away."

Mealtime at the Parkmans' had never been an occasion for small talk. The master of the house preferred to get the necessary business of eating accomplished with as little conversation as possible. On this particular evening, he was visibly annoyed over the trivialities that Margaret seemed bent on discussing at length with Mrs. Gooch, who always sat at table as one of the family. Parkman showed his displeasure by an occasional audible sniff and by pointedly ignoring attempts to include him in the conversation. Margaret babbled on and on about an imaginary conversation she had engaged in with Davidson's wife. Then, just as her father was about to finish eating, she delivered a thrust that found its mark.

"Mister Davidson was in Norridgewock yesterday," said Margaret. "He told me he was talking to a man whose brother sailed, last year, aboard a ship called the *Grey Gull,* out of Bath, and neither the ship nor his brother has been heard from in all this time!"

Margaret had addressed the remark to the unsuspecting Mrs. Gooch, but a quick glance at her father was enough to remove any doubt about his sudden interest in the conversation. The pallor of his face and the look of alarm in his eyes told Margaret almost as much as a confession. Her heart sank. Her exercise in logic had pointed to him as the culprit, yet subconsciously she had resisted complete acceptance of his guilt. Now there was little doubt that her father was involved in Arthur's abduction, at least enough to cause him to be alarmed over mention of the ship. Margaret's reaction was an overwhelming sense of shame. Deeply religious, she recalled the admonition of the pastor to "honor thy father and thy mother." How could she reconcile the commandment and the behavior of a parent who had used his money and power to send the man she loved to his death? Not only that, but her father had demonstrated his utter lack of integrity by a shocking display of hypocrisy. Her rising tide of anger swept away her natural inclination to find excuses for him. She felt betrayed and angry enough to strike back. Grimly she resolved that the very least she would do was let him know that his crime had not gone undetected. She stifled an impulse to accuse him directly—he would simply deny his guilt. Without

another glance at her father, she continued to address her remarks to Mrs. Gooch who sensed vaguely that something was amiss but was at a loss to understand what mischief was brewing.

"Also," Margaret went on, "this man told his brother, before he sailed, that some young fellow had been shanghaied into service aboard the *Grey Gull*. It seems the captain, a man named Whitley, has such a bad reputation that he has trouble making up a crew. Isn't that terrible! I've heard about men being kidnapped and forced into service against their will, but I never dreamed such a thing could happen nowadays! I suppose that poor man's family will always wonder whether he died at sea or was captured by pirates. He's been gone as long as Arthur has!"

Parkman appeared to be having difficulty with his breathing. The veins in his neck stood out like taut cords and he clutched at the collar of his shirt as if it had become suddenly too tight. He glared insanely at Margaret as if she were his deadly enemy. Once before Margaret had seen her father in the throes of such a seizure and she had been afraid. This time, anger and disgust overshadowed her fear. With pitiless persistence she faced him and said, with significant deliberation, "Do you suppose someone hated Arthur enough to have him shanghaied and sent to his death!"

Parkman slammed his fist down onto the table, upsetting a glass of water and sending it crashing to the floor.

"Stop your lying!" he yelled hoarsely. "You think you're so damned clever with your fairy tale! You never heard that trash from Rafe Davidson! You've been talking to Eli Farrar, damn him—!"

Too late, Parkman almost choked on Farrar's name.

Now thoroughly aroused, Margaret jumped to her feet.

"Eli Farrar! Eli Farrar!" she stormed." How would you know Eli Farrar could say such things to me? I'll tell you how! Because you know he found you out! And you are so sure he would tell me! Well, he didn't! He told me what was done to Arthur but not that you paid for it! I figured that out for myself and it wasn't very hard to do. Nobody in this world hated Arthur the way you do! God may forgive you, but I never shall!"

As Margaret ran weeping from the room, Parkman screamed after her, "You can't prove a damned thing!" and thereby forged

another link in the chain of circumstantial evidence against himself.

Margaret raced out of the house and down the hill to the trading post. In her extremity she turned to the woman who loved her and minutes later she was sobbing her heart out against the sympathetic shoulder of Rachel Fairbrother.

As soon as she regained her composure, Margaret related the details of her talk with Farrar and the stormy confrontation with her father.

"Oh, Mrs. Fairbrother," she said, "it is such an awful thing my father has done! Mister Farrar wouldn't tell me my father arranged the kidnapping but I know now that he did. No one else hated Arthur enough to do that! I suppose Mister Farrar was afraid that if he told me I would have a terrible fight with my father. He didn't need to tell me—we had the fight anyway!"

"I know, dear," said Rachel. "The damage is done now so you may as well know that those men told Eli that your father hired them to come and take Arthur away. Margaret, Eli Farrar is as honest as the day is long, but he just couldn't bring himself to turn you against your father."

"Then you must have known about it too," said Margaret.

"Yes, dear," said Rachel. "Edward and I, Mister Hanson, and Joseph Bonneau—we all promised Eli we would not say anything to anybody, especially you. Eli reasoned that if Arthur was able to come back, you would know the truth soon enough."

"And since he's not coming back, I was to remain in ignorance of the kind of man my father is!" said Margaret bitterly.

"It seemed best that way, dear," said Rachel. "We thought you had enough to bear without that. That's why Eli told you only enough to make you understand that Arthur did not desert you. Do you think we were terribly wrong?"

"Not really," said Margaret "In your place I would probably have done the same thing. And, of course, it doesn't matter now. Oh, Mrs. Fairbrother, what am I to do? I will not live in the same house with that man! It has taken this terrible thing to make me realize how ruthless he can be. He has too much power and too little conscience. I am ashamed that he is my father!"

"Would you like to stay the night with us?" asked Rachel.

"Oh could I? Perhaps by tomorrow I can decide what to do."

"Of course, dear," said Rachel. "We have plenty of room. It will take only a few minutes to make up the bed in James' old room. We have always kept it as a spare in case we had company. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. And don't you think it's about time you started calling me Rachel? Heaven knows you're no longer a child, after what you have been through."

That night, Margaret lay awake for hours trying to decide on a course of action. To continue living at home was unthinkable, but leaving her father's house would mean a drastic change in her life-style. There would be complications she had never faced. Merely to clothe, feed, and house herself would become immediate and very formidable problems. Teaching school in Wiggins Valley was not a paying proposition. Even Norridgewock, with its substantial number of affluent citizens, had only just begun to appropriate funds for schools. In remote areas, similar to Wiggins Valley, a teacher was often some civic-minded man of independent means. Schools were set up in such places as barns or the living room of a private residence. If a school house was built it was usually a tiny building erected on private property and the teacher was housed and fed by "boarding round." Teachers' salaries were either non-existent or dependent on the willingness of wealthy patrons to contribute. Parkman wealth had subsidized schooling in Wiggins Valley from the beginning, except for the pitifully small contributions of the villagers. When Margaret had become the teacher, even those small payments were discontinued and the instruction of Wiggins Valley children had become the sole voluntary enterprise of the Parkman family. Margaret had now to consider the effect the rift with her father would have on Parkman's support of the school. That aspect of the situation worried her almost as much as the problem of supporting herself. Obviously, some kind of adjustment would have to be made if she were to continue teaching.

The Fairbrothers insisted that Margaret stay on with them until solutions to her problems could be worked out. By the end of the week, everyone in the valley knew that Margaret was living with the Fairbrothers and tongues were wagging. On Sunday morning, churchgoers were further amazed to see their organist bareheaded and wearing only a black shawl over her shirtwaist. Margaret had fled her father's presence in such haste that she had

worn neither hat nor jacket. Rachel had furnished the shawl. Parkman, grim-faced and hollow-eyed, stalked down the aisle and took his usual place at the front of the assembly. Not once during the service did he look in his daughter's direction, which was unusual enough to cause lifted eyebrows and exchanges of knowing glances among the members of the congregation. Margaret, because of the position of the organ, could hardly avoid looking at her father but her face betrayed nothing of her emotions.

When the service was over Parkman waited outside until Margaret emerged, arm in arm with Rachel Fairbrother whose failing eyesight made her cautious about descending the half dozen front steps.

"Margaret, I want to talk to you—privately," said Parkman in a low voice.

"I'm sorry," said Margaret. "I'm going home with Mrs. Fairbrother."

"I advise you to listen to me, young lady!" His voice was an angry hiss.

Rachel whispered, "Margaret, hadn't you better talk to him?"

"All right," said Margaret in a resigned voice. Turning to her father she said, "I'm going to walk home with Mrs. Fairbrother first. If you will wait down by the bridge I'll come there in a few minutes."

Parkman turned abruptly and strode away toward the covered bridge where Margaret joined him moments later.

"Margaret," said Parkman in a harsh voice, "If you are trying to worry us by staying away, you have certainly succeeded. When are you going to stop this nonsense and come home?"

"You must have a short memory!" said Margaret angrily. "You've robbed me of the only one I ever loved or will ever love. You're a murderer, just as surely as if you had killed him with your hands! If you are worried it's because you're afraid the people in this valley will find out what you have done. What if I were to tell them why I won't live with you?"

Parkman's face lost color but his voice lost none of its arrogance.

"Why you silly girl! Who do you think is going to believe I had anything to do with that half-breed's disappearance? There is absolutely no way you can prove what you accuse me of doing.

And what makes you think valley people are going to turn on me? Over half the families in this settlement live on what I pay them. Everyone knows I supply all the things you give away. Everyone knows there wouldn't be much of anything in this valley if it wasn't for Parkman money. So go ahead and make your ridiculous accusations and see how far you get with them!"

"I wouldn't think of it!" replied Margaret. "I'd be too ashamed to admit that my father is a murderer! If the story ever gets out, it won't come from me. I won't come home and I don't care how you explain that!"

Thereupon, with head held high and typically imperious Parkman bearing in every line of her slim form, Margaret marched away, leaving her father to fume impotently.

In the small settlement it was impossible to avoid the gossip that resulted because of the noticeable change in Margaret's circumstances. Everyone knew that the Parkmans had had a falling out but scarcely anyone blamed the girl. Rather, she was admired by most for the air of quiet dignity with which she bore her self-imposed exile from Parkman luxury. Much to his chagrin, Parkman discovered that the respect accorded him proved to have been inspired by the accident of being Margaret's father. He had never enjoyed the reputation of being a lovable character and the townspeople, in general, found it easy to assume that he had abused Margaret in some way. He found himself being treated with a barely civil coolness, which suggested that nearly everyone blamed him for his daughter's isolation. It was a measure of Parkman's contempt for the opinions of the lesser folk of Wiggins Valley that he continued to treat everyone with his customary arrogance. He no longer attended church meetings regularly, but whenever he was there he ignored Margaret's presence completely. It was a situation that pained Elder Lewis and he attempted to remonstrate gently with Parkman. He never did so a second time.

"Elder Lewis," Parkman had said coldly, "what's between my daughter and myself is our own business and not a subject for religious moralizing!"

Chapter 16

The year 1789 was an eventful one for the nation, the territory of Maine, and the Wiggins Valley settlement. The immature republic was slowly putting its house in order, that it might make the most of its hard-won freedom from British domination. In April, General George Washington became the first President of the United States of America with John Adams as Vice-President. Alexander Hamilton became the Secretary of the Treasury, in which department the office of Postmaster General was created. General Henry Knox was selected as the Secretary of War and was given the responsibility of establishing the first formal organization of the United States Navy. Thomas Jefferson became Washington's Secretary of State.

To civic minded Ed Fairbrother it seemed obvious that the time had come for setting up some formal type of town government. Wiggins Valley residents had always operated as a kind of loosely organized cooperative whenever matters of community significance were to be considerd. The system had worked satisfactorily for a small group of families but was becoming unwieldy as a means of settling every problem of an expanding population. Fairbrother and others recognized that the settlement ought to be officially established with legally recognized boundaries and duly elected town officers. Early in June, Ed called for a meeting to which he invited Eli Farrar, Tom Hanson, and Henry Plummer, Parkman's long-suffering and able mill foreman. Assuming chairmanship of the group, Fairbrother first questioned Plummer about his employer.

"Henry, you've been with Parkman ever since Monty died so you must know him better than any of us. He owns more than half the town and ought to be concerned with whatever we decide about town government. Everyone expected him to take the lead in civic matters after Monty died but of course he never did. He always acted as if the whole town was his personal property. It seems to me that he never cared much how the town was run as long as nobody interfered with his business. Hardly anybody likes the man, especially these days, but his mill is the biggest industry in the territory and I should think he would want to be consulted before we do anything about setting up an official

board of town officers. Eli and Tom and some others think we should simply ignore him and I'm sort of on the fence myself. What do you think about it?"

Plummer's reply was a revelation.

"Ed, what I have to say may surprise you. I'll tell you right now that I don't think it is good idea to invite Parkman to have anything to do with this matter. I honestly think the man is losing his mind. You must have noticed that he hardly ever goes to church any more. He's not sick, at least not in body as far as I can tell, but sometimes he stays away from the mill for three or four days. That isn't like him. Lately, whenever I speak to him, he sometimes acts as if I wasn't there and his eyes seem to look right through me. It's the damnedest thing you ever saw! Another thing, he's quit ranting and raving at everybody like he used to, and let me tell you that is definitely not like him. He forgets things from one day to the next and I never knew him to forget anything—not even the smallest detail. And listen to this. The other day when he seemed more like his old self he said to me, 'Henry, you've stuck by me all these years and I know I can depend on you to run the mill even if I'm not here every day.' Well sir, you could have knocked me over with a feather! I couldn't believe my ears! He's always acted as if we were all too stupid to do anything unless he spelled it out for us. I think the man is growing senile and, since you asked my opinion, I don't think he'd be any use to us at all. For years he's been the cock of the walk but now I don't think he knows where the walk is all the time. Somebody or something has cropped his tailfeathers and that's no joke!"

Eli caught Fairbrother's eye and winked.

"Reckon he might have something preying on his mind?"

Having no idea of its significance Plummer took the question at face value.

"I don't know about that," he said, "but something is nudging him close to the deep end!"

Acting on Plummer's advice the four men went ahead with plans for making Wiggins Valley a legal township. On Sunday Elder Lewis was asked to make an announcement that a town meeting would be held at the school building, one week from Monday, and that a matter of great importance to the community

would be presented for discussion.

In the afternoon, at a meeting of the new town officials, one remarkable circumstances came up for discussion.

"How'd it happen that his royal majesty let us get away with having a town meeting without him showing up?" asked Eli Farrar.

Henry Plummer offered a possible explanation.

"He hasn't been down to the mill since last Wednesday and he wasn't at church yesterday. He's probably having another one of his spells."

Margaret, who was recording the minutes of the meeting, said nothing and her impassive facial expression gave no hint of her thoughts.

The business for which the temporary town officers had been appointed was taken up without delay. The wording of the petitions was of prime importance and it was decided that advice should be sought from someone versed in proper legal terminology. Margaret provided the answer to the problem. Numbered among her acquaintances in Norridgewock was the son of a prominent judge. Constable Tom Hanson provided a horse and a buggy and accompanied Margaret, armed with maps and other data, to Norridgewock where they sought assistance from Judge Harlan Black, the father of Margaret's friend. It was a most successful conference. The judge, who had been a signatory on Norridgewock's earlier petition, drew up the necessary documents and provided valuable advice concerning their presentation.

By the end of the week the Wiggins Valley petitions had been signed, sealed, and sent by post to the proper authorities.

One of the questions taken up at the momentous town meeting had been the matter of a legal name for the settlement. A few old timers wanted to name the town Parkman, out of respect for Margaret's revered grandfather, but a majority of the voters felt that the name Wiggins Valley ought not to be discarded. The name had survived from antiquity, antedating even Monty Parkman's entry into the valley. The river and the valley, by common usage, had been named to honor the courage of an enterprising pioneer who had taken his family into the valley in search of a place to build a sawmill. Unfortunately, he and his family had been slaughtered by hostile Indians. When Monty

Parkman came to the valley, the only remaining evidence of the Wiggins presence were the fire-scarred ruins of a cabin and a half-finished sawmill, and the Wiggins massacre had become folklore. To perpetuate the memory of Jeremiah Wiggins and in accordance with the wishes of the majority of voters the settlement was eventually named, legally, Wiggins Valley. In later years it was to lend its name to the titles of other villages, such as Wiggins Falls, Wiggins Mills, and Wiggins Crossing, settlements that sprang up along the northern reaches of the river.

In October Rachel Fairbrother suffered a stroke and died. Margaret, at Fairbrother's request, stayed on as his housekeeper.

On the fifteenth of November, a charter was granted by the General Court of Massachusetts, making Wiggins Valley an official township. Much to the satisfaction of the acting town fathers their petition for tax relief was also approved and the property owners were so informed at another town meeting. In recognition of the effort which their temporary officers had put forth on their behalf, the grateful citizenry voted permanent status to their interim officials and tenure of their positions for four years.

Margaret became the immediate beneficiary of the tax relief provision. She now received a small salary for her services as the schoolteacher and some additional compensation for her work as secretarial assistant to Henry Plummer the town clerk. Though far from adequate, her earnings now allowed her to pay for the simple needs to which she had accustomed herself. She refused to accept any pay for her services as Fairbrother's housekeeper and no amount of insistence on Ed's part would make her change her mind.

"Mr. Fairbrother," she told him, "you and Rachel took me in when I had no place to go. Rachel taught me to be useful—taught me skills that every woman in this valley, except me, has known since childhood. I never had to cook much, or sew, or clean house, or wash and iron clothes. Now I can—not as well as Rachel, of course, but I am learning. Becoming a part of your household was the best thing that ever happened to me. What I do for you is not nearly enough to compensate for what you did for me and are still doing. So let's not have any more talk about salary. I simply will not accept it!"

"Young lady," said Fairbrother with a chuckle, "you sound

like Parkman, and that's a fact. All right. I won't press you if you feel that strong about it. But don't you go skimping on things for yourself. Anything you want out of the store is yours."

Margaret had indeed mastered her homely household duties, few of which she had been required to perform in the Parkman establishment. She liked to sew and had become more than a little skillfull with the needle. She seemed to thrive on hard work and long hours. Most of her friends admired her industry and the way she appeared to have put aside her personal tragedy in favor of giving service, with quiet dignity, wherever and whenever the need arose. So efficiently did she manage the Fairbrother home, along with her many other duties, that Ed Fairbrother sang her praises at every opportunity.

Just before Christmas Margaret fell heir to a problem she might have foreseen, had she been less the artless young woman that she was. Ed Fairbrother, to his dismay, had learned that a certain busybody had been complaining to Reverend Lewis that it was unseemly for a young unmarried woman, Margaret Parkman to be precise, to be living in the same house with an unmarried man. Mild-mannered Ed was too embarrassed to say anything to Margaret and sought advice from Eli Farrar.

Eli snorted in disgust.

"Don't you know what's eating that woman? She's had her eye on you ever since Rachel went. She wants to stir up a stink around town so's to get Margaret out of your house. She figures that'll make it easier to get her hooks into you. You don't realize what a catch you are, friend—heading the town board, owning a good business, and a long ways from being dead yet! Better watch your step, Romeo!"

Ellie May Griffin, the sharp-tongued spinster who had complained to the Reverend Lewis, never made specific accusations against anyone but she was an expert at innuendo. Everyone knew exactly what she meant. She left no doubt in her listener's mind that something shameful was going on in the Fairbrother household, or, at the very least, there was danger of misconduct as long as Margaret remained in Ed's house.

At the supper table, Fairbrother was struggling to discover the least offensive way to appraise Margaret of the problem. So great was his agitation that he appeared to have lost his appetite.

Margaret realized that something was bothering him and after watching him pick at his food she said anxiously, "Don't you feel well, Mister Fairbrother?"

Ed laid down his fork and sighed. Lines of age seemed to deepen in his usually placid countenace. Spots of color in his cheeks marked the depth of his embarrassment as he blurted, "Margaret, they're saying you ought not to live here!"

Margaret looked startled.

"Ought not to live here! I don't understand that. Who are 'they'? And why shouldn't I live here?"

Ed's discomfiture was obvious as he stammered his way through a recitation of the snide remarks Ellie May Griffin had made to Reverend Lewis.

"Margaret," he said, "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything in the world. It's not only embarrassing but it gets my dander up to know that anyone would dare suggest that you would be a party to anything improper, either in my house or anywhere else. I want you to know this: if you decide to do nothing about it, it's all right with me."

"Mister Fairbrother," she said, "I think it is best that I do something and quickly. You said the Lewises would let me live with them. Perhaps I should move in with them and probably the sooner the better. I will talk to Elder Lewis tomorrow. Please don't be upset. I know how difficult this must be for you. It doesn't seem possible that Ellie May really believes what she is suggesting about us. She might think I have designs on you but there isn't a soul in this entire valley that believes you capable of misconduct. Everybody respects you for the fine man you are. That vicious old gossip must have something against me—certainly not against you."

Now that the subject was out in the open and the position of each was clear, Ed managed a half-hearted chuckle.

"Let me tell you what Eli said. He said that old biddy has had her eye on me and thinks I'd marry her if you weren't around. Eli says she wants to get you out of my house so she'll have a clear field! Clear field, my foot! Do you know what I told Eli! I said I wouldn't have that woman on a silver platter! And I wouldn't—that's a fact!"

"So that's it!" said Margaret. "Eli is probably right. He is

seldom wrong about people. At any rate we had best deal with this silly business immediately. I will not be a source of embarrassment to you, after all you've done for me."

"Margaret," said Fairbrother, once more intensely serious, "I don't want to lose you and not just because you're so good at looking after the house and me. You're as fine a woman as my Rachel and I think as much of you as I would my own daughter. If you leave, and I'm still not sure it is necessary, you must allow me to help you. There will be things you will need which the ridiculous salary you are receiving will not cover. I discussed this with Elder Lewis and he agreed that if you do move in with them no one needs to know that I am helping. Lord knows I owe it to you. You've never accepted anything from me except bare necessities."

"Oh, Mister Fairbrother," said Margaret, "I wish I could feel that it is all right to stay. This has been my only real home. I don't know what I would have done if you and Rachel hadn't taken me in and given me a chance to recover from all the discouraging things that happened to me. I've found a measure of contentment here. I've been able to get a grip on what I want to do with my life. Arthur would not want me to give up and here I have found the courage to face up to whatever the future may hold for me. I shall certainly not repay you for all your love and understanding by bringing down on your head this slanderous gossip our town busybody has seen fit to circulate. I'm sure the wisest thing I can do is to move in with the Lewises immediately."

In her room that night Margaret knelt beside her bed, and, unusual for her, surrendered to her misery in a fit of weeping. In the stark months without Arthur she had gradually learned to steel herself against loneliness and had seldom given way to self-pity. Her lot had been made somewhat easier because the villagers, in general had been sympathetic and kindly. Ellie May's vindictiveness had been totally unexpected. Taken by surprise her hard-won peace of mind had been shaken and her self-confidence had momentarily deserted her. She wondered sadly how many others might have doubts about her chastity.

By the time Fairbrother had closed the post and returned home Margaret had gone to bed and lay staring into the darkness and reflecting upon this, the latest of the misfortunes that seemed to

come her way periodically. With typical Parkman indomitability she forced herself to put aside her personal distress and began to consider instead the damage that might be done to Fairbrother's reputation if she were to remain in his home. Secure in the knowledge of the purity of her own actions she was little concerned about herself. On Fairbrother's account she burned with anger against the Griffin woman and her unwarranted suggestions of misconduct. The woman was certainly a bad example of a Christian. The mealy-mouthed old hypocrite! She sits in church and gives the impression that she believes in Christ-like virtues and then has the gall to attack the reputation of a good man like Ed Fairbrother! Thus the thoughts of an embittered Margaret Parkman who had already experienced a horrible example of hypocrisy in the actions of her own father.

Margaret went to church on Sunday morning with her mind made up to accept the Lewises' offer. She was determined to be out of the Fairbrother house by Sunday evening. All through the church service she could not keep her glance from straying, again and again, to the pinched somber face of Ellie May Griffin, the author of her latest problem. As she watched the woman sitting in pious silence, Margaret's thoughts were decidedly uncharitable. The old Pharisee! Her soul must be as sour as her face! No wonder she never married! Who in the world would want her! Margaret found herself torn between chiding herself for her ungracious estimate of Ellie May and justifying her righteous anger over the vicious gossip the aging spinster was attempting to circulate.

After the close of the service Margaret waited until the Griffin woman was on her way home, then caught up with her well out of earshot of the rest of the congregation.

"Miss Griffin," said Margaret, "I want to ask you something. You made some remarks to Elder Lewis that I don't understand and since they concern me I think I deserve an explanation. Will you please tell me why you suggested that I should not be living in the Fairbrother household!"

Ellie May was startled but for a mere instant. She locked her fingers into the ends of her shawl and folded her bony arms across a bosom all but devoid of feminine contours. As if the question had been offensive, Ellie looked down her patrician nose and fixed Margaret with a haughty stare.

"Margaret Parkman," she said acidly, "you ought to have enough sense to figure it out for yourself so I don't see any reason why I should explain. You're supposed to be such a smart woman. Maybe I've been misinformed."

Thoroughly aroused, Margaret was not to be put off.

"Let's agree that I am stupid!" she said coldly. "I want to know exactly what you are suggesting. Please confine your explanation to words of one syllable so that I may be certain of your meaning! From what I have heard I think you are implying that something illicit has been going on at Fairbrother's house!"

"All right, Miss High-and-Mighty!" snapped Ellie May, "I'll tell you! You can have anything you want by going home where you belong, but not you! Why've you stayed on since Rachel died? It ain't respectable! Everybody knows you ain't taking anything from your father but you seem to be doing just fine. Ed Fairbrother tells everybody that'll listen what a jewel you are—spoke up for you in town meeting and all. What I say is where there's smoke there's fire!"

"Ellie May Griffin," said Margaret, thoroughly disgusted, "you are a nasty old woman and you ought to be ashamed of yourself! I don't care a fig about what you think of me but what you are suggesting about Mister Fairbrother is a malicious lie! He is the finest man I ever knew, save one, and is absolutely incapable of any such sordid action as you imply!"

"Is that so!" sniffed Ellie May. "Well, men are men is all I say!"

"How would you know?" retorted Margaret. "Perhaps you are more experienced in the ways of men than we have suspected up to now!"

Margaret turned angrily and walked away, leaving Ellie May, for once, too tongue tied to compose a parting shot.

"Why are people so ready to believe the worst?" she complained to the Lewises.

The elder and his wife were both inclined to discount Margaret's belief that people had lost faith in her integrity.

"I think you are unduly concerned, dear," said Mrs. Lewis. "I can't think that anybody really takes Ellie May seriously. Caleb has taken her to task again, rather severely, on religious grounds, and admonished her that Christian people do not cast stones at one another. I must say, though, that I'm afraid he only made

her angry."

And so it seemed because Ellie May stopped coming to church regularly and refused to speak to Margaret whenever they chanced to meet. A sour note had been introduced into the hitherto harmonious relationship between Margaret and the villagers. Without realizing that she was reacting in typical Parkman fashion, Margaret became gradually more withdrawn, more self-contained, and less inclined to exert herself to be cordial.

The majority of Wiggins Valley people loved Margaret and were inclined to pity her because of her misfortunes. There was, however, a small clique of women, friends of Ellie May Griffin, who were only too willing to exact a kind of reparation inspired by long-held resentments against the imperious Parkmans. The persistent backbiting of this vindictive little group of female malcontents attracted little attention at first. Their activities consisted largely of gossiping among themselves and of snubbing Margaret in public. Winston Parkman had not been seen at church meetings for weeks and the Griffin group started a rumor that he was losing his mind and they suggested that his condition was being aggravated by his daughter's continual refusal to have anything to do with him. Exercising the irrational logic of malicious minds, the group sought to build sympathy for a man with an unnatural daughter, in order to diminish Margaret's stature, while at the same time they condemned everything in which Parkman had an interest. Most men of the town paid little attention to the talk. Even the two men whose wives were in the group dismissed the gossip as "the cackling of a bunch of old hens," and refused to take any of it seriously. Finally, the hate clique hit upon the idea of suggesting that Margaret be dismissed from her teaching job. Elly May and two of her cronies went to Ed Fairbrother and demanded that another town meeting be called to consider the question of whether Margaret was a fit person to be teaching Wiggins Valley children. Thoroughly upset, Ed consulted with Eli Farrar. In his peculiar position of having been part of the original complaint, Fairbrother felt that he should not make any decision by himself. Farrar delivered himself of some choice expletives and scurrilous generalizations concerning the nature of womankind, after which he calmed down and considered the advisability of calling a special town

meeting.

"Go ahead and call it," he advised Ed. "Seems to me it would be a good move. Ain't nobody, except Ellie May and her cronies, going to believe you'd have the gall to call a meeting if you are guilty of anything. Anyway if you don't call a meeting them old hens'll never shut up. I ain't afraid of how folks will vote. And another thing, it'll be a good thing for Margaret to find out that most of the town ain't stupid enough to pay any mind to Ellie May and her dirty-minded old biddy friends."

The meeting was called and, true to Eli's prediction, almost everyone voted against Ellie May. Margaret should have felt exonerated but the fact that a meeting had to be called left her wondering how long it might take for the Griffin woman's poison to spread throughout the town. She became even more withdrawn in her manner. Little remained of her youthful ebullience except when dealing with her beloved schoolchildren. The severe lackluster of her dress and coiffure added emphasis to the facade of aloofness she now displayed, until even her most sympathetic friends were hesitant to engage her in conversation. In a town made up of taciturn New Englanders Margaret was the most uncommunicative of all. She was never uncivil, but her shield of quiet dignity parried any attempts to penetrate her reserve.

Chapter 17

Early in the evening of a bitterly cold January Sunday there was a knock at the door of Eli Farrar's modest cabin. The ground cover of soft snow had muffled the footsteps of Eli's visitor. He had no inkling of her approach and came to the door in his usual comfortable bachelor untidiness of dress. Finding Margaret at his door he started to retreat out of sight, then changed his mind.

"Come in, come in, girl!" he said. "It's cold out there. Just excuse me a second until I put on my jacket. You've caught me when I ain't dressed proper."

Margaret smiled faintly.

"Now Mister Farrar, don't be embarrassed. Anyone who works as hard as you do is entitled to relax in his own house in his own way. Besides, I know what long-sleeved underwear looks like,

you know. I washed and hung out Mister Fairbrother's often enough."

Having donned his jacket hastily, Eli invited Margaret to seat herself in front of the fire crackling cheerily in the huge Farrar fireplace.

"Better unwrap that muffler of yours, Miss Margaret," said Eli, "else you will get too warm and take a chill when you go out again."

Margaret nodded in agreement and removed the heavy woolen muffler from around her throat. For some moments she stared at the fire, apparently uncertain of what to say.

Eli said nothing. As he waited for her to speak he noted that her sober face seemed a little drawn. It's a shame for a pretty girl to look so tired, thought Eli. The appearance of weariness was provided more by her posture than by her face. She seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. However, in spite of the drabness of her clothing, or perhaps because of it, her attractive countenance was as a jewel against dark velvet. The warmth of the fire was beginning to put roses in her cheeks and beneath her long-lashed eyelids there was a sparkle in her eyes. Again, as in times past, Eli reflected upon the injustice of events that had denied this lovely, lonely girl the companionship of the man she loved so dearly. What now could be her problem? Whatever it was, he stood ready to help if he could.

As if attuned to his thoughts, Margaret looked up, smiled ruefully, and said, "Mister Farrar, it seems I am always coming to you with my problems. This time I believe that only you can help me. I'll come straight to the point. I want to find another place to live. The Lewises are kind, dear people but they refuse to accept more than a token payment for my presence in their home. I try to help out but Mrs. Lewis allows me to do next to nothing really useful. Besides that I expect I'm not very good company. I am still distressed that it took a town meeting to keep my teaching assignment from being taken away. I feel sure that many of the townspeople have lost faith in me. I am convinced that even Mrs. Lewis, dear Christian soul that she is, wonders why I don't go home."

Eli tugged at his beard.

"Miss Margaret I'm sorry you feel the way you do. Ed and I

thought that town meeting would prove to you that most folks ain't stupid enough to take that Griffin woman serious. As far as the Lewises go, you're the only one that knows how you feel about staying there. What do you have in mind?"

Margaret's next words were not really a surprise to Eli. He had been aware of her visits to Arthur's cabin—visits frequent enough to have caused talk around town.

"Mister Farrar, what's to be done with Arthur's cabin? It just sits there empty."

"To tell the truth I ain't sure," said Eli. 'Nobody's showed up to claim it. As far as I know, Art don't have no relatives living, except among the Indians and none of them has ever come around. The only person I've talked to about the property is the tax collector."

"Oh my!" said Margaret. "I never thought about the taxes! What will happen if they aren't paid?"

"Don't worry about that," replied Eli. "The tax collector showed up at the post, not long after Art was took, and talked to Ed and Ed told him to see me. He said the taxes were past due so I paid them and have kept them paid ever since. Figured that's the least I could do for Ed Saint-Pierre's boy. It ain't much of an expense anyway and I got nothing else to spend my money on."

"Oh, Mister Farrar!" said Margaret with a break in her voice, "you are such a wonderful man! I hope everybody appreciates you as much as I do! I want to help with the taxes. In fact, I wish you would let me pay them. I would like the feeling of doing something for Arthur. Now I'm going to ask you the question I meant to ask before I moved in with the Lewises. What do you think about my moving into Arthur's cabin?"

Having guessed where the conversation was leading, Eli appeared to be little disconcerted by Margaret's question.

"You mean you want to live there permanent?"

"If no one objects, that's precisely what I do mean," said Margaret.

"But, Miss Margaret," said Eli, "you oughtn't to live up there all sole alone! It ain't proper!"

"Oh come now, Mister Farrar," said Margaret, "not you, too! People are always telling me what is proper!"

"That ain't exactly what I meant," said Eli hastily. "I mean to say it ain't safe for a lone woman to be living by herself with no protection."

"But Mister Farrar," objected Margaret, "Ellie May Griffin has been living alone for years."

"I know," said Eli, "but she lives right in the middle of town. Besides, who'd want to bother that old biddy!"

"My goodness," insisted Margaret, "it isn't as if I would be miles away from town. The cabin is right above the trading post. And suppose I could induce some other woman to live with me—for instance, one of the women from Athur's foster mother's tribe. I've thought about that. What I would like you to tell me is whether you think anyone would object to my living in Arthur's cabin."

Eli studied Margaret's eager face for a moment and turned away. His heart ached for this lonely child who was willing to brave the certain criticism of the townspeople so that she might become custodian over things that once belonged to her beloved Arthur. Eli wanted to acquiesce to her plan but he also wanted to shield her from the tongues of her critics, if there was any way possible to do it.

"Miss Margaret," he said, "I don't know of a soul who might say you don't have no right to live there, but there'd be talk and to spare! Do you have any idea what you'd be letting yourself in for if you do this?"

"Oh yes," said Margaret with a wry smile, "I've learned my lesson well. I know very well that I shall be criticised and probably be called eccentric or something worse, but I really don't care very much. I've been robbed of almost everything that makes life worth living. My honesty and virtue have been questioned. I cannot tell people why I don't go home to live with a murderer. It seems little enough to wish to live among things that meant something to Arthur—to live in the house, but for the vileness of my father, I would now be occupying as Arthur's wife!"

To her chagrin, as she spoke Margaret's eyes filled with tears and she turned her head away in embarrassment.

Helplessly tongue-tied at the sight of Margaret's distress, Eli sought in vain for words that might comfort her as she sat weeping silently. For a few moments the only sound in the room was the

crackling of the fire.

Margaret recovered quickly.

"I'm sorry, Mister Farrar," she said brokenly. "I promise myself I will not cry and then I do!"

"Nothing to be sorry for, Miss Margaret," said Eli gruffly. "I shouldn't of come at you the way I did. Just wasn't sure you had looked at all sides of the question, but I guess you have. I'll say this—there ain't anybody I know that can stop you if you really want to move in. If anybody tries I'll see they get told where to head in!"

Eli's assurance was given with a heartiness he really did not feel. He had little liking for her plan but saw that it was useless to argue against it. Since she was resolved to live in Arthur's cabin he promised himself that he would do everything he could to protect her.

Satisfied with Eli's assurance, Margaret thanked him and went on her way.

The following weekend she packed her meager belongings and climbed the hill to Arthur's cabin, leaving the Lewises to murmur in dismay over the folly of her decision. As expected, the town buzzed with the news of her move. Ed Fairbrother hurried to confer with Eli and found to his surprise that Eli had nothing to say against what, in Ed's opinion, was an unwise action.

"You mean you think it's all right for her to live up there by herself," said Fairbrother in amazement.

"Won't be by herself," replied Eli. "Joe Bonneau's kid sister, the one with the crippled arm, is going to live with her. Margaret came to see me a week ago Sunday and said she wanted to find some woman to live with her so I got Joe to go and talk to her about Midge. Joe thought it was a good idea and so do I. Midge Bonneau is seventeen years old and kind of a cast-off, you know. She ain't exactly happy living among all them kids of Joe's. She'll likely be glad to get rid of changing diapers and sleeping in a bed with three other kids. Best thing is, Midge thinks Margaret Parkman is the salt of the earth. She'll be a big help to her. She ain't that bad crippled that she can't do housework—as much as Margaret will let her do."

"Well, at least that's something," said Fairbrother dubiously. "But, now listen—I want you to be sure and let me know if

there's anything she needs."

After the initial shock had worn off, most of the townspeople accepted Margaret's move with much less expressions of disapproval than she had expected. Some even admired her spunk and said so publicly. To the more kindly inclined, there was something deliciously romantic about a lovelorn girl wanting to live among her lost lover's possessions. Ellie May Griffin, predictably, could not resist the temptation to deliver some caustic remarks on the subject, but few people paid any attention to Ellie any more. Her venomous crusade against Margaret had become tiresome and pointless.

As usual, that winter, there were a few minor illnesses among the schoolchildren, but nothing more serious than a few colds, until the day one of the girls from a French family living at the head of the valley developed symptoms that worried Margaret. The girl complained of a severe sore throat and of aching "all over," and she was stricken with recurring spells of coughing and sneezing. Margaret became so concerned at her distress that she closed the school early and took the girl home. During the following week, everyone in the child's family became ill with what the French called "La Grippe," or influenza. Within a few days more, someone in every family where there were schoolchildren had contracted the disease and the town found itself in the grip of an epidemic. Margaret kept the school closed and took upon herself the task of helping out in families where the mother was too sick to take care of her household and the husband was away in camp. Margaret was on the job from early morning until late at night, making beds, cooking meals, changing diapers, feeding babies, and administering whatever simple remedies were available. She appealed to Fairbrother and Farrar to seek the assistance of a doctor. Eli traveled on snowshoes to Norridgewock but could find only one doctor willing to brave the obvious hazards of entering the stricken valley.

The only physician in Norridgewock not overburdened with patients was Doctor Launcelot McAdams. "Lance" McAdams was known as an experimenter, a deviate from accepted medical practices. He was said to be an addict because some people claimed he took "stuff" for recurring severe headaches. The better element of the city would have nothing to do with him. There was talk

that he had left London under a cloud—something about the dissection of cadavers, which was looked upon as blasphemy, prying into God's secrets. The few patients who patronized Doctor McAdams were stubbornly loyal, probably because everyone he treated got well, unless afflicted with a disease that was known to be incurable. Even some of the incurables were eased out of mortality with less suffering than was usual.

No one but his few close friends knew that Lance McAdams, in addition to being an excellent doctor, was a humanitarian to his fingertips. Eli had little trouble persuading him to come to the aid of disease-ridden Wiggins Valley. McAdams was quick to recognize that Margaret Parkman possessed the temperament and ability of a first-class nurse and commended her performance of the herculean task she had taken on. He immediately insisted that she shift some of the burden to others who recovered sufficiently within a few days to enable them to take care of routine household chores. The uncomplicated cases usually recovered in less than a week and were little the worse for their illness.

"You're not indestructible, young lady," McAdams told Margaret. "You won't be any good to anyone if you keep driving yourself until you get down too! Let the recovered ones do the housework. My experience has shown that anyone who has gotten over an attack of this accursed scourge will be at least temporarily immune to a second attack. I need you and I need you healthy. You are much more valuable as a nurse than as a housekeeper, so stop punishing yourself and get some rest!"

Early one Sunday morning, when the worst of the epidemic was over, Margaret awoke with a sore throat, alternate chills and fever, pains in her back and legs, and a splitting headache. She sent Midge to tell Doctor Mac that she had probably contracted the disease herself and wouldn't be able to help for a while. McAdams returned immediately with Midge and saw at once that Margaret was desperately ill. Her temperature soared rapidly and remained elevated for four days. She became extremely weak and was prostrate to the point of almost utter helplessness, even after the fever subsided.

These were dark days for Midge. She couldn't have loved Margaret more if they had been sisters and she was desolate because she could do so little to help her beloved former teacher.

The doctor made Midge wear a camphor mask and promise not to go near Margaret any more than was necessary. He asked Eli to borrow a bed from one of the villagers so that Midge could sleep on the far side of the room, away from the bunk where Margaret lay critically ill.

For a day or two after her fever had subsided, Margaret's condition appeared to be improving slightly. Then, on the third day, during the early morning hours, she developed a dry, hacking cough and by daylight was stricken with painful paroxysms of coughing that left her perspiring profusely and experiencing difficulty with her breathing. Her temperature shot up again and at times she tossed about in delirium. When the doctor arrived that morning, he was aghast at her condition.

Midge was frantic.

"Doctor, she is so sick! Sometimes she doesn't know what's going on! This morning she tried to get out of bed because she thought Arthur was at the door and she had to go let him in! And she can't seem to get enough to drink—she keeps asking for water every few minutes."

"That, at least, is good," said McAdams. "Let her drink all she will. But try to keep her from kicking the bedclothes off. She must be kept warm and as quiet as possible."

There were tears in Midge's eyes.

"Doctor McAdams, what is wrong with her now? Is she going to get well?"

McAdams was examining Margaret's lips and fingernails closely for the telltale darkening he had so often observed in patients with severe respiratory infections. He was relieved to find none but her breathing was labored and her pulse rate much too rapid.

The doctor shook his head in frustration.

"Midge, I'm afraid our girl has developed some trouble in her lungs. Thank God she is young and strong. She pushed herself to the limit trying to help others and worked herself into a state of exhaustion. I wish she could have saved some of that strength to fight this infection. We must try to get her to sleep as much as possible. I'm going to give her something to knock down the fever so she won't be so restless."

From his waistcoat pocket McAdams producted a small phial containing a white powder. He dropped a generous pinch of the

powder into a cup of water.

Midge was watching closely.

"What's that stuff?" she asked.

"Midge," said the doctor, "I don't have a name for it, but it does reduce pain and fever."

"But what's it made of?" insisted Midge. "Are you sure it's good for her?"

McAdams smiled. So much for the deference a man of medicine considers his due! Midge's concern for her Margaret transcended every other consideration.

"Midge," said McAdams gently, "believe me, I would not give Margaret anything unless I was absolutely sure it would help. I know what this stuff will do because I have taken it myself and have given it to other patients. Now, come and help me."

The doctor slid his arm under Margaret's shoulders and raised her up so that she could drink the mixture which Midge held to her lips. Margaret swallowed with difficulty but, little by little, managed to drink all of the medicine.

Within a half hour it was apparent that the patient was more comfortable. She stopped tossing about and slept. She was obviously less feverish. Satisfied that Margaret would be safe in Midge's care, McAdams decided to look in on some of his other patients.

"I'll be back this evening, Midge. Do you need any help here?"

Midge assured the doctor that she could handle things by herself and McAdams left. Midge watched his departure with adoring eyes. Obviously, the man was a miracle worker!

When the doctor returned in the evening Margaret was awake and, to Midge's delight, had taken a few spoonfuls of gruel. In Midge's book, if a sick person was well enough to eat she was practically cured. But Margaret continued to cough and perspire and exhibit extreme lassitude. The disease had taken its toll of her slender form. She had lost weight until she was so thin that, as Midge put it, "a puff of wind would blow her away." She was pale and hollow-eyed, but she managed a wan smile in answer to the doctor's greeting.

"Well, young lady," said McAdams, "you look as if you are feeling better. Are you having any pain?"

"Not pain exactly," said Margaret in a voice barely above a

whisper. "I just feel tight—here." She placed her hand on her chest.

McAdams administered another dose of the powder and shortly thereafter Margaret fell asleep. While waiting for the medicine to take effect the doctor had been sitting by the fireplace and had himself fallen sound asleep.

There was a knock at the back door. The doctor roused up as Midge went to see who was calling. It was Eli Farrar, asking after Margaret.

"Come in, come in," said McAdams. "Margaret's better. Come sit by the fire and talk to me."

Eli stamped the spring slush from his boots, put out his lanthorn, and sat in the other rocking chair at the doctor's side.

"Glad to see you sitting down for a change, Doc," said Eli. "You been going like a house afire. How much longer is this work of the devil going to plague our valley?"

"Not much longer, God willing," said McAdams. "We're nearly out of the woods now. Henry Plummer's wife worries me a little but I think she's going to survive. She was better when I saw her this afternoon. I believe the worst is over for Margaret too. I've managed to keep her temperature down and she's sleeping more. That's the best thing for her—rest and more rest. She's young and apparently has been in excellent health until now. Perhaps that's the reason this thing hit her so hard. A person who's "never been sick a day in his life," as they say, always seems to suffer more acutely than someone who has had his share of illnesses."

Eli was fascinated by the doctor's absorption with his subject. He already admired the doctor and his respect for him increased as he listened to McAdams and sensed that the man was dedicated completely to his profession and its improvement. Though he would never have expressed himself in such terms, Eli felt there was something noble about a man who fretted because he couldn't keep people from dying or heal them quickly when they were sick or injured.

Margaret's condition improved slowly during the following week until she was finally allowed to get out of bed and sit in a chair as long as she felt comfortable. In spite of her apparent improvement, however, Doctor McAdams was far from satisfied

with all aspects of her case. She had regained little of her appetite and, but for Midge's insistence, would have been satisfied to subsist all day on little more than a cup of milk. She continued to be afflicted with extreme lassitude and was incapable of walking more than a few steps unassisted. Loss of appetite and weakness were to be expected in the wake of such a serious illness, but McAdams was concerned over Margaret's mental languor. Having worked with her at her lively best the doctor was at a loss to understand her listless attitude toward recovery, and voiced his concern in a talk with Eli Farrar.

"Eli," he said, "Margaret is bound to need a few weeks to get her strength back. I've left her some tonic that should stimulate her appetite. Physically, I find nothing wrong with her. But her attitude bothers me. She appears to have suffered a kind of mental relapse. She was so full of enthusiasm—so strong willed and efficient when I first came here. Now she seems pathetically withdrawn and discouraged. I asked her if she was worried about her condition and she said she wasn't particularly worried, but she just felt tired all the time. And she said that almost as if she meant she was tired of living. I don't understand her at all. She's going to turn herself into a chronic invalid if she can't be persuaded to throw off her attitude of resignation."

Eli stroked his beard the while he gazed at the doctor with a speculative eye.

"Doc, how much do you know about the troubles our girl had before you came to the valley?"

"I know about the disappearance of her young man, if that's what you mean." said McAdams. "Also I was told that she doesn't get along with her father."

"Doesn't get along is putting it mild, Doc," said Eli. "Can't tell you what all the fuss is about because it ain't my place to be telling tales out of school, but I can tell you she'll never patch it up with her father, and that's the truth. Losing the man she was going to marry hit her pretty hard too."

"I should think she would want to forget him," said McAdams. "He couldn't have loved her very much to just up and leave without any explanation."

"I can see you've been hearing what some people think about Art Saint-Pierre. Believe me, Doc, it wasn't like that at all. Just

so's you won't go home thinking my best friend's boy was no good, I'll tell you this much—he was lost at sea and Margaret knows it, but most folks in town don't."

"But she is so well thought of by the townspeople," said McAdams, "and, as you said, so well loved by everyone, I should think she would feel secure and not become so withdrawn and listless."

"Well now," said Eli, "there was one time that it would've been hard to make her believe that everyone loved her—when it took a town meeting to shut up a few old hens who accused her of being a bad woman!" Whereupon Eli proceeded to enlighten the doctor on Ellie May Griffin's role in the affair.

"Eli," said McAdams, "this conversation proves to me that I have been guilty of making a diagnosis without first being possessed of all the pertinent facts. And that is something a responsible physician should never do. Even so, I got the impression, from working with Margaret, that nothing could break her down. Apparently I have been misled by appearances."

"Don't know about that, Doc," said Eli, "but she has talked to me when she was feeling pretty bad and I'm telling you that's one lonely little lady. Being so bad sick was kind of like the last straw, I expect."

"You are probably right, Eli," said McAdams, "and unfortunately I can do very little about it. You and Midge and her friends will have to help her now. I am sure her body will recover quickly if there is some way to restore her zest for living. I wish I could stay but the valley doesn't need me any more and I should get back to my faithful in Norridgewock. I've been gone much longer than I intended, but I'm glad I was called here. There are some very fine people in this valley. I am sure I will be visiting here from time to time. These folks seem to like my brand of medicine. Be sure to send for me if you feel that Margaret really needs me. She is more than just any patient to me."

"Doc, I hate to see you go. Don't know what we would have done without you. I ain't the only one who wishes you'd move here."

"I might just do that one of these days," said McAdams. "Good-bye, Eli. I'm sure I'll see you again. Any time you're in Norridgewock be sure to come and see me. Better get a move

on—here comes Tom Hanson. He insisted on driving me home."

The spring rains came late in April. On fair mornings the soggy earth steamed under the sun's rays. The snow disappeared rapidly from the open fields, while remaining in stubborn mounds in the deep woods. Wiggins Valley, finally free from the scourge of influenza, was back to normal, except that the school was still closed for lack of a school teacher. Margaret showed little improvement. Her normal vigor had not returned. Her many visitors were shocked at her hollow-eyed appearance and came away shaking their heads and wondering whether she would ever leave her bed. The battle with infection seemed to have drained her of the will to fight for recovery. The spendid courage that had sustained her through disillusionment and criticism appeared to have deserted her completely. Her listlessness was extreme. She tired so easily that she finally refused to make the effort to walk more than a few steps. On warm days Midge would wrap her in a blanket and persuade her to sit outdoors in a rocking chair. Long suffering and loyal to her adored patient, Midge was frantic from worrying over her condition. She complained tearfully to Eli whenever he came to visit.

"Mister Farrar, she doesn't seem to care whether she gets better. I don't know what to do about her. Some nights I hear her crying when she thinks I'm asleep, and it just breaks my heart! She has a letter that she must have got from Arthur before he went away. She keeps it under her pillow and I know she reads it over and over when I'm not watching her. It's the only thing she reads any more except the Bible. She never asks about the school or anything that's going on in the valley. Her mind always seems to be far away, like she is daydreaming. What am I going to do to help her?"

"Midge," said Eli, "I ain't got an answer for you. I've heard tell that a person can have a broken heart and I guess that's what Miss Margaret's suffering from. She wouldn't let anybody see that when she was strong and healthy, but the sickness has changed her. I just hope the God you pray to wants her to get well!"

PART TWO
The Destiny of Arthur Saint-Pierre

Chapter 18

The Sunday evening of May 9th, 1788 brought rain which began at dusk.

"Just what we need!" muttered Arthur in disgust. "The Wiggins is still running over its banks. If this keeps up it'll be summer before we can start the drive!"

The day had been unseasonably hot and humid. As surely as night follows day, such a combination of heat and humidity invariably bred thundershowers in the valley. At first, an ominous growl of thunder warned of worse to come. Angry storm clouds came scudding in from the northeast and darkness fell rapidly. Flashes of lightning increased in frequency and intensity, each followed immediately by a loud crash of thunder, beneath which the earth shuddered. The wind began to blow. It whooshed eerily around the corners of the cabin. Then, all at once, the full fury of the storm struck. The heavens seemed to split wide open, releasing water in a deluge. It battered the cabin roof and filled the room with a fearful sound. But, like a child's violent temper tantrum, such furious activity could not persist for long. Almost as suddenly as it began, the intensity of the storm abated. The sound of thunder faded to a distant rumble and the rain settled down into a steady drizzle.

Vaguely aware of the angry weather, Arthur fell to staring into the fireplace. Absently he noted the stray drops of rain that came down the chimney and expired in tiny, steaming hisses on the glowing embers. Heaven grant, was his silent prayer, this

newfound happiness of Meg's and mine may not be shortlived, like those drops of rain.

The rain persisted. The fire burned low. Arthur punched up the hot coals and threw on a fresh log. Urged by a feeling of restlessness he went to stand at the front window. In vain he strove to look across the valley, hoping to see the light that was certain to be at Meg's window . Rain splashed against the streaming panes, making it impossible to see clearly through the sodden wall of darkness.

Try as he would Arthur could not shake his restiveness. He selected a book from his collection, only to find that he could not concentrate on the text. The rainfall gradually lessened and finally stopped altogether. As if he had been waiting for that to happen, Rusty arose and padded to the back door. He whined faintly, begging to be let out. Arthur let the dog out and returned to the front window. Now, across the valley, there was a faint glow at Meg's window. She would have read his letter by now. He wondered whether it had pleased her. Perhaps he should not have written so much about his uneasiness. Meg was being brave in the face of certain opposition and he regretted that he had not been more circumspect. In loving fancy, he beheld Meg as he had last seen her, seated at the organ. He felt again the thrill of loving intimacy implied by the gentle touch of her fingertips.

Arthur's reverie was broken momentarily by the faint sound of his dog's barking. Rusty had probably caught the scent or sound of something—perhaps a stray rabbit or an adventurous squirrel. Rusty was too old to give chase but he never failed to sound the alarm.

Arthur could not have said how long he stood and stared at the glow of light at Meg's bedchamber window. Across the darkened valley, the spot of light was like the faint gleam of a distant star and, as the hour grew late, it finally faded from sight. As he turned away from the window, Arthur suddenly realized that Rusty had been outdoors for an unusually long time. He had not scratched at the door as he usually did when waiting to be let in. Arthur opened the back door and called out.

"Rusty, where are you boy?"

There was no answer from out of the dripping darkness. Arthur stepped outside and called again. There was no answering sound,

save the whispering of the wind among the tall pines. He was immediately concerned that something might be wrong with the old dog who had been his beloved companion since childhood. Reentering the cabin he lighted a lanthorn and crossed the clearing to the stable. There was a small opening in the stable wall over which hung a flap of wood suspended by a strip of rawhide. This allowed Rusty to come and go from the stable at will. The old dog would often crawl into the hay and fall asleep. Arthur fully expected to find him there now, alive, he hoped.

Arthur pulled open one of the stable doors and stepped inside. For the very briefest space of time he sensed that he was not alone—just an instant before he took a crunching blow on the back of his head. Brilliant streaks of flame shot upward inside his skull and flickered out, as he lost consciouness.

"Well, well, 'ere's a bit of luck! The poor blighter saved us the trouble of 'aving at 'im in his cabin! That might 'ave been a bit chancy! 'E' as the look of a lad as ain't easily man'andled , so 'e does!"

The speaker was a small shadowy figure with a high-pitched voice.

Arthur's lanthorn had fallen to the ground but the candle still burned. In the dim light another figure, a burly giant of a man, quickly righted the lanthorn and laid out some rawhide thongs and pieces of cloth he had been carrying in a pouch.

"C'mon," growled the burly one, "let's git him tied up and gagged before he comes to!"

In short order Arthur was bound securely, hand and foot. A gag was forced into his mouth and held in place by a strip of cloth that circled his head and was knotted at the back of his neck. To complete the helplessness of their victim, his abductors masked his eyes with a blindfold of heavy cloth. The big man hoisted Arthur to his shoulder where he hung draped like a half-empty meal sack.

"Put out that lanthorn and let's git out of here! Hurry up! This younker's heavier than he looks!"

The entire sinister performance was accomplished with dispatch, bespeaking previous experience, and accompanied by little sound save the nickering of Saint-Pierre's Arabian. The dog was nowhere to be seen or heard. The two abductors, with their

unconscious burden, hurried across the clearing and a few yards into the woods where they had left three horses tied up.

Silence descended upon the clearing, broken only by the eerie creaking of the cabin's back door as it swung back and forth at the caprice of the wind. Within the cabin, candles eventually guttered out and the fire died on the hearth. Darkness hid the evidence that anything was amiss as the rain began to fall again.

On leaden feet, Arthur struggled on and on through a thick fog of insensibility until, at last, he became aware that he was painfully alive. His head throbbed in nauseating surges. It seemed as if every drop of blood in his body was beating against the back of his skull. He had little trouble in determining that his body was draped over the back of a pack animal. Every jarring step of the horse aggravated the painful throbbing in his battered head. His wrists were bound behind his back and his shoulders ached from the unnatural position. He tried to spread his legs and could not since his ankles were bound tightly together. His hands and feet felt numb. Rain was falling steadily and his clothes were sodden with cold water. He shivered violently and sucked in his breath as a wave of nausea set his stomach aquiver. His jaws ached because of the securely bound foul-tasting gag. His blindfold was water soaked. The cold, soggy cloth against his eyelids added to his discomfort.

As the realization of his utter helplessness overcame him, Arthur's initial reaction was one of furious anger. Never in his life had he been at such a disadvantage. He strained against his bonds with all his strength. He tried to roll free and discovered that he was tied securely to the horse's saddle. His struggles served only to increase his discomfort and he soon abandoned further attempts to free himself.

As the heat of his anger subsided, Arthur began casting about for the reason behind his mistreatment. Who would realize benefit from his abduction? Parkman? Perhaps, but in spite of all that had passed between Margaret's father and himself he could not bring himself to believe that Parkman, irascible as he was, would resort to such a cowardly method of enforcing his will. But, if not Parkman, who else? Arthur could think of only one person who might, out of spite, abuse him in such a manner—McKelvy, the lumber camp bully who had suffered humiliation at his hands.

That must be it, he thought. I might have known that losing my temper would catch up with me some day. McKelvy was certainly capable of taking revenge in just such an underhanded fashion. If McKelvy was responsible, what were his intentions? It was said that he had once killed a man, but McKelvy had been drunk at the time. Surely he would not go that far deliberately. But what then? Probably some form of sadistic abuse. In any case, there was nothing he could do to prevent what lay ahead.

The horse stumbled and came down hard on his front feet. The jouncing aggravated the pain in Arthur's head. Something stung the side of his face. He stiffened involuntarily, bracing for another blow. When it did not come he concluded that the slap must have come from contact with the branch of a bush beside the trail. He became aware of a rushing sound that grew louder as the beast plodded on. Obviously, the horse was following one of the river trails. The rushing sound increased until it became the roar of a waterfall. Arthur knew of only one place in the Wiggins where there was a fall that could produce such intensity of sound. It was in the lower Wiggins where there was a sixty-foot drop in the stream bed. The spot was a scant two miles from where the Wiggins emptied into the Kennebec. So he—whoever his abductor might be—was headed south.

Arthur's ordeal of the next two days was a nightmare of discomfort. His blindfold was never removed. His hands were never untied, although the bonds were loosened once when his captors discovered that the wet rawhide had shrunk so much that his fingers were horribly swollen. From the talk that went on between the two men he learned that neither of them sounded like McKelvy. It was then that Arthur reconsidered his earlier assessment of Parkman's innocence in the matter. There was simply no one else who could have a reason for abducting him. He was forced to wonder what Parkman intended to have done with him. He was given nothing to eat during the two days of the journey on horseback, at the end of which he was taken down and dumped into a boat and covered with what smelled like a wet deer hide. Arthur was thankful that the boat rode smoothly, allowing the throbbing in his head to subside. During the boat ride his gag was removed and he was given water to drink. When he tried to ask questions he was told to keep still. When he resisted being

gagged again the big man struck him in the face.

"Open your yap, mister less'n you want a broken jaw!"

The speaker was gravelly voiced and plainly in no way kindly disposed toward his captive. Arthur submitted to the gag since there was nothing to be gained by resistance and the blow in the face had renewed the pain in his head. With the possible exception of McKelvy, Athur had never felt hatred toward anyone, not even Parkman. He resolved, however, never to forget the voice of the man who was abusing him nor to forego some appropriate form of retribution, if ever the opportunity presented itself.

Once Arthur was picked up and carried bodily around what was evidently a place in the river where a boat could not navigate safely. The man who carried him was the gravelly voiced one who handled Arthur with an ease indicative of his great size and strength.

Once again in a boat and weakened by pain and hunger, Arthur slept fitfully. The passage of time lost its meaning. His splendidly conditioned body, wracked with pain, became a quivering hulk. He wondered if ever his torment would end and how.

Surcease from his horrible discomfort finally came when at length he was taken aboard a ship and dumped into the hold. His ankle thongs were removed and replaced by leg irons joined by a short length of chain. His wrists were untied but his fingers were so swollen that, for a time, he was unable to remove his blindfold and gag.

Free at last from the foul-tasting gag, his mouth and tongue were parched and sore. When he stripped off his blindfold he found himself in almost complete darkness. The dank air was cold and heavy with the odor of stale bilge water. He groped about and discovered some hard biscuits and a small jug of water. He ate a little of the bread and drank most of the water. He was lying on a blanket atop a lumpy heap of furs. He covered his exhausted body with the blanket and sank into merciful slumber.

Chapter 19

In the early days of colonial shipping, many of the vessels used in intercontinental trade were sloops, single masted with one or

more foresails. Throughout the eighteenth century, New England sloops made the Atlantic crossing routinely. Not as spectacularly beautiful under full sail as the square-rigged clippers, the merchantmen sloops were generally broad of beam to allow for ample cargo space. Because of possible depredation at the hands of privateers, the earlier sloops were fitted with four to six gun ports on either side and armed with cannon. Such a vessel was the fifty-five ton *Grey Gull*, a converted Navy ship, carrying a twelve-cannon armament and rigged with mainsail, two foresails, and a small square top sail. She rode low in the water at her mooring in the ship-building city of Bath at the mouth of the Kennebec River. The *Gull's* master, one Captain Jeremiah Whitley, against his better judgement, had allowed the stevedores to load his vessel with cargo destined for the European market. Captain Whitley, in anticipation of the course he was required to follow on this particular crossing, would have preferred to dry dock his ship in the excellent facilities at Long Reach, for the purpose of scaling, recaulking, and greasing of the *Gull's* barnacle-encrusted hull. The *Grey Gull,* adequately seaworthy under ideal conditions, was in such sad need of attention that she was sluggish under way and slow to answer her helm. Dry docking and cleaning a ship the size of the *Gull* would have required many more days than the ship's owner was prepared to allow. Unequivocal orders had been passed to Captain Whitley. He was bidden to sail with the tide on the 15th of May, 1788—destination: Marseille, France.

There are men who squander affection on inanimate objects. The woodsman cherishes his axe above all his worldly goods. A proper seaman, especially a captain worthy of his commission, usually exhibits an inordinate amount of pride in his ship. Captain Jeremiah Whitley was not partial to such sentimental nonsense. He was a man of tainted reputation, due in part to the circumstance that once, in foul weather, he had run aground while personally at the wheel and "as drunk as a boiled owl," as the saying went. In his unforgivable bleary-eyed confusion, he had missed the channel and piled up his vessel on the shoals off Boston Light. There were other stories, never corroborated, alleging that he had once been a slaver. It was said that he would carry any cargo, illicit or otherwise, for a price. His reputation not-

withstanding, Whitley was a competent shipmaster having several Atlantic crossings without incident to his credit. Although not especially concerned with the appearance of his ship above the waterline, he had twice tried to persuade the ship's owner that time ought to be allotted for relieving the *Gull* of its gross impediment of barnacles and marine weeds. Atlantic crossings had become hazardous for vessels whose destinations required venturing into Mediterranean waters. Whitley was well aware that his ship was not in its best condition to take on the sleek Barbary corsairs, the piratical scourges of the Mediterranean and neighboring shipping lanes.

For many years, the privateers had preyed on foreign shipping, with the exceptions of ships flying the colors of France or England who paid tribute annually to buy immunity from confiscation. As long as ships from the colonies flew the colors of Britain, they were permitted passage without molestation but, once the colonists gained their independence, the corsair captains, contemptuous of the fledgeling republic, considered American vessels to be fair game. Every New World shipmaster knew the story of the American sloop *Squirrel,* out of Casco Bay. In 1783 it had been seized by Algerine pirates and now, five years later, the fate of Captain Alexander Paine and his crew was still unknown. It was assumed that all, like so many others, were chained to oars in some Algerine galley. With such incidents on the increase, Captain Whitley could hardly be blamed for his anxiety over the coming assignment, when this ship was not at its fighting best. Adding to the captain's uneasiness was the presence, in his vessel's hold, of a young prisoner who was being abducted to satisfy some obscure purpose of the ship's owner. Whitley had first objected to the arrangement but, as usual, the captain's battle with his conscience was a brief one, rendered so by the size of the stipend he was to receive for his acquiescence. As a further sop to the captain's flexible sense of morality, the owner's agent was aboard. Technically it was he, a man named Quinn, who had charge of the prisoner and would be responsible for his ultimate disposal.

On the evening of May 14th, Whitley and his first mate sat at table with Abel Quinn, the ship owner's agent, who had come aboard an hour earlier. Each man held in his hand a mug of steaming hot spiced rum.

"My compliments, Captain," said Quinn, "on your choice of refreshment. It truly takes the curse off that perishin' cold gale outside. Is it your opinion that we're in for a hard blow?"

"I doubt it, and we'd better not be in for a long one, either," said Whitley morosely. "We sail in the morning, come hell or high water!"

At that moment the cargo-laden *Gull* rose on the crest of a heavy swell and settled with a dull thump against the wharf guards.

"Mister Jenkins," snapped Whitley, "whistle up some hands and move us away from the dock. We should have done that as soon as cargo was stowed. Stand off at least a cable's length. Look lively now, before our starboard side's stove in!"

With a hurried "aye-aye," the first mate left on the run.

As soon as the mate disappeared up the hatchway Whitley, in a voice reflecting his sullen annoyance, delivered himself of some comments he had been saving until the two were alone.

"Quinn, I've no liking for this abduction business. What the hell is Blackman up to anyway? I can understand putting a man in irons for mutiny, but this is out and out kidnapping. I've done some shanghaiing in my time but this man wasn't taken aboard because we need another crewman. The Maritime Board has been giving me the fish eye already, for a couple of things they can't prove, and if this gets out I might lose my papers!"

"Yes," replied Quinn, "if it gets out. But it won't. To begin with, you didn't have a hand in the kidnapping. Blackman's men did and they're in no position to say anything. Don't worry, Captain. Just get us to Marseille and you'll never see our prisoner again. You don't even need to know his name."

"Oh, I know his name all right," said Whitley, "or at least what he says his name is. He claims to be Arthur Saint-Pierre from a place called Wiggins Valley. He's tried to worm information out of every man who's gone near him. Of course, nobody could tell him anything because they don't know anything. Far's that goes neither do I and I told him so."

"That's good," said Quinn. "Just let it lay that way. I know you're getting well paid to look the other way and Saint-Pierre is my responsibility anyway."

Captain Whitley, still dissatisfied, stared sourly at the agent.

"Tell me something, Quinn. What's Blackman got against this Frenchman? He seems harmless enough."

Quinn spread the fingers of his hands in a gesture of denial.

"I don't know any more about it than you do. And I don't intend to ask. I'm getting paid to do a job. The reasons behind it are none of my business."

"Funny—real funny," said Whitley. "According to Frenchy he comes from a place that's way to hell and gone up in lumbering country and he never mentioned knowing Blackman. But he asked me how much Winston Parkman is paying to have him put out of commission! Who the hell is Winston Parkman? Ever hear of him?"

Quinn's head came up and he eyed the captain apprehensively. He answered the captain too quickly and too emphatically, but Whitley seemed not to notice.

"No sir, I never heard of such a person. Blackman owns this vessel, as far as I know, and I take my orders from him. If someone else owns the *Gull* I don't know who it is and I don't care, so there's an end on it!"

"There may just be an end on it!" said Whitley. "This'll make the second crossing I've done for Blackman and it'll be my last if he expects me to keep on doing his dirty work. My reputation is bad enough already without adding kidnapping to the list! Another thing—I'll not take the *Gull* out again, after this trip, until she's scaled and greased. Money ain't going to be worth a damn if we get picked up!"

"Are you worried about that?" asked Quinn.

"No," said Whitley. "If I was I'd quit right now. I'm armed with twelve nine-pounders and my gunnery mate's been sailing with me for ten years. We've never been boarded yet. All the same, I'd feel better if we had a clean bottom!"

Abel Quinn was a thoroughgoing scoundrel, uniquely fitted for his role in Parkman's scheme to be rid of Arthur Saint-Pierre. His selection had come about through Blackman's recommendation. Parkman, unknown to any Valley resident, had been operating in partnership with Blackman for two years and had discovered his partner to be a man who was not at all fastidious about his selection of ways to make money. Dismissed from a lucrative government contract for padding his accounts, Blackman had

allowed Parkman to buy in to his failing business for the obvious reason that Parkman had plenty of money to invest. Blackman's business had been confined to coastwise shipping but Parkman wealth had made it possible for the new partnership to expand its operations to include overseas trade. Parkman had yet to realize profit of any consequence from the venture but the glib and persuasive Blackman had been able to pacify his inexperienced partner with glowing promises of substantial returns sure to be realized in the third year of business. When approached by Parkman with his scheme to abduct Arthur Saint-Pierre, Blackman saw immediately that he was being presented with a golden opportunity to get his hands on more of Parkman's considerable wealth. A shrewd judge of human nature, Blackman had nothing but contempt for Parkman's business acumen but not for his money. He fell in eagerly with Parkman's plan to get rid of Saint-Pierre.

"As it happens," he told Parkman, "I know just the man for this project. He's been working for me, or, I should say, for us, for the past year and a half. You know him. He works out of our Bath office. Name's Abel Quinn."

"Yes, I know who you mean," said Parkman. "What makes you think he could be trusted to do what I want done?"

Blackman's mirthless laugh held a derisive note.

"Just offer him enough and he'll do anything you say. Let me fill you in on a little of his background. He sneaked out of England to avoid prosecution for absconding with company funds from a mercantile house in London. The money didn't last because he's an inveterate gambler and hardly ever wins. The way to handle him is to promise final payment only after the job is done. Make no mistake—he's a shrewd article. He's the best agent I ever had and knows his way around in the European markets. Let him take care of your Frenchman. I've already assigned him as agent on your Marseille shipment in May. I'll arrange to have the Frenchman brought in and put aboard the *Gull*. Quinn'll know what to do with him when they dock in Marseille. Go talk to him. You'll find he'll have plenty of ideas on how to handle this affair. Now, if you really want to go through with this you'd better be prepared for the expense. We'll all be taking chances you know."

"I understand that," said Parkman. "You'll all be well paid if this is handled the way I want it to be. What about that new shipmaster? He'll have to know what's going on."

"Don't worry about Whitley. He can't afford to be fussy, but you'll have to make it worth his while."

Parkman met with Quinn and explained what he wanted done. As Blackman had predicted Quinn was amenable to the scheme as long as the reward was to his liking.

"It wouldn't be any trouble to arrange a little accident during the crossing," suggested Quinn. "Suppose we were to bring him up on deck for exercise and he fell overboard. You'd be rid of him for good."

"I'm afraid you have the wrong idea, Quinn," said Parkman. "If I wanted him dead I'd have hired an assassin! I simply want him out of the country for a while and the longer the better. But I will not be a party to murder! If you can't handle this, forget it. I'll work out something else."

Quinn had no intention of foregoing a chance at a generous slice of Parkman's wealth, as well as an opportunity for blackmail he foresaw in the future.

"All right. If a little accident is too rich for your blood, how about this? I can have him shanghaied aboard a French galley. That'll put him away for a few years and it won't kill him. It's like being in a penal colony. He can earn his release in about five years if he's a good boy. If he isn't, it'll take longer."

"How will I know that what you say is true and that you actually succeeded in having him conscripted?"

"You won't," said Quinn, "unless you want to come along with me to see that it gets done. They don't hand out written contracts for that kind of duty. But I assure you that I can and will pull it off. It's up to you."

Quinn was not only a convincing liar but a good judge of character. He had taken Parkman's measure and marked him for a man easily duped. It was common knowledge among experienced overseas seamen that any man taken in slavery aboard a galley had no hope of release except by death. Parkman either did not know that or he was not as concerned about Arthur's death as he claimed to be. Quinn was inclined to believe that Parkman was simply naive.

"He swallowed my story about forced consignment on French galleys," Quinn told Blackman later. "He's lived in the country so long he doesn't know any better!"

Whether or not Parkman was innocent he vacillated for a long time over his decision to accept Quinn's plan of action. That he finally agreed to it was evidence of the unreasoning hatred he bore toward the half-breed who dared to love his daughter.

Chapter 20

By dawn on the fifteenth of May, the gale had blown itself out. It was a morning to lift the spirits of any man who loves the sea. The sky was clear and a brilliant sun cast long shafts of gold across the dancing whitecaps. The prevailing wind was a stiff offshore breeze, ideal for sailing. Promptly at ebb tide, with all sails drawing, the *Grey Gull* slid out past Parker Head and took to the open sea.

Abel Quinn's responsibility was two-fold. Not only was he to dispose of the prisoner but he was to exercise his talents in the bartering of the cargo, which consisted of furs, bundles of barrel staves, and casks of pickled salmon. In Marseille the merchandise was to be exchanged, as advantageously as possible, for French wine, olive oil, glass, and French pottery.

The best of man-made plans often go awry, as Quinn and Captain Whitley were soon to discover. The Atlantic crossing was uneventful, but the *Gull* had cleared the Gibraltar Strait by a scant two hours when an urgent yell from the lookout startled the captain.

"Ship sighted, sir—astern!"

Whitley caught up a glass and scanned the western horizon anxiously.

Quinn joined the captain at the rail.

"What's it look like?"

Whitley lowered the glass and began to curse bitterly.

"Just my luck! That's a damned corsair and he's coming fast! He'll overhaul us long before we make the Gulf of Lyons! I tried to tell that stupid Blackman that we couldn't outrun even a skiff, when we've a full cargo and our bottom's fouled the way it is!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Quinn anxiously.

"Do!" snarled Whitley. "I'm going to fight, of course! No damned corsair is going to board me!"

Sailing close-hauled the *Gull* had been beating to windward at a pace much too sluggish for Whitley to hold the slightest hope of outracing the corsair, whereupon he changed course abruptly. Running before the wind and rigged with every square foot of cloth she carried the *Gull* began to make better headway. The gun crew hastened to open all the ports and roll out all twelve cannons. Inexorably the expertly manned corsair, sleek as a seal in the water, drew within firing range of the merchantman and put a shot across its bow. When Whitley failed to heave to, the corsair let fly with one after another of his four larboard twelve pounders, while the *Gull's* gunners were still lighting their linstocks. The skill of the pirate gunners was immediately evident. Disheartening damage was done to the *Gull's* rigging and the forward starboard gun was put out of action by a ball that carried away part of the gun carriage and killed the gunner. Whitley's gunners returned fire with the remaining five starboard guns, fired in sequence. The first three salvoes did some damage to the corsair, but the last two were ineffective since the corsair had veered around to present only his bow as a target. By the time, the sluggish *Gull* had come about to bring its larboard guns to bear on the corsair, another broadside from the privateer's starboard battery raked the merchantman's deck, wreaking fearful damage. One shot cracked the mainmast and the main deck became cluttered with a tangled mass of splintered spars, ripped sailcloth, and shrouds torn loose from their clews. Again, the *Gull* returned fire but too hastily. The ship had heeled over in the swell and most of the shots fell harmlessly into the sea. The lumbering *Grey Gull* was quite obviously no match for the corsair, who could maneuver more swiftly than his prey. Time after time, the corsair would get off a broadside and then veer quickly away from the *Gull's* line of fire. Another shot hit the splintered mainmast and this time it went down, leaving the merchantman to wallow helplessly in the heavy swell. White-faced in impotent rage, Whitley struck his colors. He had no intention of losing his life in defense of a ship whose owner he despised.

The privateer proved to be manned by Algerines operating

under the strict rules laid down by the government in Algiers, which sanctioned the very profitable practice of seizing foreign cargo vessels. Bloodletting was ordered to be held to a minimum. It was also required, upon seizure of a foreign crew, that as many unbelievers as possible be given the opportunity and privilege of joining the ranks of the followers of Muhammad. Whitley, Quinn, and the crew of the *Gull* were herded aboard the corsair and confined below decks. A prize crew was put aboard the *Gull* to clear her decks of rubble and the dead and assess the damage. The *Gull* was not damaged below the waterline but until a new mast could be stepped she would have to be towed. Cables were strung from the poop of the corsair to the bow of the *Gull* and the corsair got under way with the crippled cargo vessel trailing behind. The privateer, now flying the green Algerine ensign spangled with silver stars around a crescent moon, had once flown United States colors. She was the sleek former American ship-privateer *Cobra*, taken in a previous seizure, and the corsair captain found amusement in the fact that both ships were American.

It was not until the captor and the captured were anchored safely in the calm waters behind the Barbarossa-built breakwater, which protects the port of Algiers, that Arthur was released from confinement aboard the *Grey Gull*. The privateer captain had at first ordered that the prisoner be left undisturbed. Upon learning that Saint-Pierre was French, the captain decided to allow him on deck, pending investigation of his citizenship status. At that time an uneasy truce existed between Algeria and France.

Freed of his leg irons and blinking in the bright sunlight, Arthur saw, for the first time in his life, the highly fortified city of Algiers, bent like a bow and protected on the land side by a crested barrier of hills. For the moment unmindful of the danger in which he stood, Arthur gazed in awe upon the sixteenth-century, Turkish-built buildings climbing up the hills and converging upon the apex of a triangle in a section, he later learned, known as the Kasba. Viewed from the deck of the *Gull,* nearly all the buildings, constructed of a primitive but extremely durable cement, appeared to be newly built, despite their centuries-old age. Mosques and minarets, white as alabaster, were strange sights to the eyes of a young man accustomed to the provincial architecture of Wiggins Valley. Arthur's always lively curiosity,

aroused by the sights and sounds of the alien city, overcame much of the deep depression of spirit into which he had fallen. In a curious retreat from reality he stood in fancy, with Meg at his side, enjoying her reaction to scenes that she, too, had never beheld.

Arthur's brief interlude of reverie was interrupted, none too gently, when rude hands seized and lowered him over the side into a longboat manned by four swarthy cutthroats. During the trip to shore Arthur tried, in English, to question his captors. Receiving no sign of understanding he tried again in French with an equal lack of success and sank once more into morose speculation upon what might lay in store for him.

The New Englanders were not kept long in suspense concerning their fate. They were brought immediately before the Dey, Baba Mohammed ben-Osman, the current "instrument of Allah." The "infidels" were given a choice: become Mohammedans or be consigned as slaves to Algerine galleys. The wily Captain Whitley agreed to embrace the Islamic faith, probably because he foresaw the possibility of elevation to the captaincy of a privateer, an occupation for which he was singularly fitted, both by temperament and experience. Strangely enough, Abel Quinn, rascal though he was, balked and refused angrily to accept a religion so much at variance with the religion of his childhood. The crew of the *Gull*, stiff-necked Yankees all, would have none of the strange faith. One by one they were led away to the banyolar, prison barracks, where they would be given time for a change of heart before being assigned to the galleys.

When Arthur was first brought before the Dey there was consternation among court officials, until it was learned that Arthur was an unimportant born citizen of the new republic and not a French national. France had not yet embarked upon her campaign of subjugation against the North African states, but there were ominous rumors that such was her intention. Algerine officials felt that even the most insignificant of incidents might be used by France as an excuse to start a full-scale war. During his twenty-four year reign as Dey, Baba Mohammed had never been guilty of the diplomatic blunder of breaching a precarious peace by imprisoning or mistreating an innocent citizen of a nation with whom there was an exchange of consuls still in effect.

His true citizenship having been established, Arthur, volubly rebellious, was confined to prison quarters, along with Quinn and the rest of the Gull's contingent.

As near as he could reckon, Arthur figured that it was late in July or early in August when all the Yankee unblievers were again brought before the Dey. Their confinement had done nothing to weaken their resolve to stand firmly against any attempt to proselyte them, either by relatively gentle persuasion or intimidation. All were herded aboard a huge thirty-oar masted galley. Each was stripped of all possessions and clothing, save a loin clout, and shackled, four to an oar, to the benches they would occupy day and night from then on.

Thus, in abject slavery, began a phase of Arthur Saint-Pierre's existence that was to push his endurance, both mental and physical, to its absolute limit. His outlook on life would undergo a radical change. His ability to retain his sanity would come under attack. Eventually he came to doubt that his ordeal would ever end except in death. To all intents and purposes Winston Parkman's action in having him abducted had ended Arthur's mortal existence.

Chapter 21

For centuries the Mediterranean Sea was the scene of fierce struggles for naval supremacy. Over the years the galley, in most cases a moderate-sized vessel, had been used as a warship. It was still in use upon the occasion of Venice's capitulation to Napoleon at tne end of the eighteenth century. At the time of Arthur's conscription, galleys were declining in popularity and usefulness but Algiers still maintained a fleet of significant size. In the relatively calm waters of the Mediterranean, and with slave labor readily available, the galley continued to be an important arm of the Algerine navy. From an economic standpoint the domination of Algiers over other nations in the Mediterranean area was due, in no small measure, to the highly profitable seizures of foreign cargoes by Algerine corsairs. Corsair captains were amply rewarded for their piracy and, in most cases, became wealthier than legitimate merchants ashore.

Algerine galleys, the "hell-ships" of the Mediterranean, were holdovers from the days when the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Phoenicians used them as war vessels because of their maneuverability. They carried small sails but depended for motion chiefly upon the rowers. The treatment that these wretched creatures received was incredibly cruel, calculated to reduce a human being to the least common denominator of existence—a life of near starvation, constant physical suffering, and utterly hopeless mental anguish. Slaves were chained together so close that they could not sleep at full length. Their food allowances were barely enough to sustain life and woefully inadequate for supplying the energy needed for labor at the oars. Officers on galleys carried canes, the handles of which were fitted with vials for perfume. The scent helped to disguise the nauseating stench emanating from the filth of the slave deck.

Arthur soon lost all sense of the passage of time. The dreary months seemed to have no beginning or ending but were blended into a nightmarish and apparently endless tour of duty stretching away into a future without hope of relief. At times, death seemed preferable to the torment from which there was no escape. Memories of the brief hours of happiness with Meg would often come to haunt his tortured mind. He had trouble sorting out reality from hallucination. There were occasions when he plumbed the depths of despair so deeply that he went near to madness. Only his inborn courage and faith in his God prevented him from losing his mind. He fell to praying for hours to a Heavenly Father he had been taught to believe never gives man a burden without also providing him with the strength to bear it. He was unable to communicate with anyone. Whether by design or not, Arthur had been placed with benchmates who spoke a strange tongue. All had been in servitude for years. One, seated near the gangway amidships, resembled nothing so much as an animated cadaver in which no spark of intelligence was discernible. He babbled constantly in an unintelligible, singsong undertone. He would often fall asleep and be awakened by the overseer's cruel lash. Arthur had been shackled nearest the bulkhead. The two slaves between him and the witless one were convicted Muslim criminals who rarely spoke for fear of the lash. It was forbidden for slaves to talk and the rule was enforced by vigorous applications of the

whip.

As the months went by, Arthur's hair and beard became tangled masses of dirty strands, stiff with dried sweat. His superbly muscled body shrank until he became alarmingly thin, yet no amount of abuse could dissipate the essential hardiness of the robust constitution that was his heritage. His digestive system ceased to rebel against the starvation diet of stringy goat meat, stale bran bread, and brackish water that kept the slaves alive. So well did his body adjust to the meager diet that he was able to toil, hour upon hour, at the oar without apparent exhaustion. His endurance became almost superhuman. The muscles of his back, arms, and broad shoulders developed the strength of steel bands. The overseer, an obese, overfed sadist, who swaggered about among his helpless charges, came to look upon the durable Frenchman with awe and thanked Allah that the bearded slave was shackled securely. The ill-concealed hatred in Arthur's deep-set eyes must have haunted his dreams.

Arthur, along with his fellow slaves, felt often the stinging bite of the overseer's lash, which raised bloody welts on bare flesh. Two of the former crew of the *Gull* had been in poor physical condition when captured. They sickened on the inadequate diet and when they lagged at the oar they were whipped until their backs were torn and bleeding. Weakened by lack of sufficient food, the horrible punishment, and utter exhaustion, they both died and were heaved overboard like so much offal.

The overseer of the slaves took a sadistic delight in abusing the rowers. He strode the gangway with his ever-present whip ready to inflict chastisement on the flimsiest of pretexts and often with no valid excuse at all. When the wind was erratic or nonexistent, the slaves were required to furnish all the power to propel the ship. It was then that the punishment was most severe. At the stern of the slave deck, where all could hear the beat, sat the pacemaker. With a mallet in each hand he would pound on a large block of wood to mark the rhythm for the strokes of the oarsmen. To increase speed the pacemaker simply increased the frequency of his mallet strokes, while the overseer laid on with his whip to force the slaves to keep pace. Early in his confinement, Arthur learned something of the contempt in which the lives of the slaves were held. On one occasion the speeding galley bore

down upon a merchantman wallowing in a heavy sea. Mountainous waves carried the galley dangerously close to the merchant ship. The Algerine captain, who should have known better, waited overlong to give an order to pull away from his collision course. The galley slid down the side of a huge wave and crashed broadside into the merchantman. Grave injury to the rowers was inevitable as the sixteen-foot oars buckled and splintered against the hull of the cargo ship. Inside the slave deck oar handles were wrenched from the grasp of the oarsmen. The flailing handles broke ribs and arms and knocked others senseless. Luckily for Arthur, his station was on the starboard side, away from the carnage. The overseer, in response to the captain's frantic order, wielded his whip vigorously and the starboard oarsmen managed to swing the galley away out of danger, too late to benefit the screaming wretches injured in the crash. One suffered a crushed chest and died where he sat. Another, bleeding from a cracked skull, hung moaning piteously over his shattered oar handle, while his closest benchmate, with one arm crippled, strove to prevent him from pitching forward onto his face. Arthur stared in horror at the havoc wrought by the smashed oars. Angered by the injustice of the situation, his volatile temper flared and, in an impotent, incautious fit of rage, he seized the chain by which he was shackled and wrenched at it furiously, seeking to tear it loose from the huge staple fastening it to the planking of the hull. The overseer screamed at him and laid the lash across his shoulders, again and again, until Arthur, with hell in his heart and hatred blazing in his eyes, desisted reluctantly from his efforts to free himself. So wrought up was he that he scarcely felt the sting of the lash.

"You stinking fat slob," screamed Arthur, "if I ever get loose I'll strangle you with my bare hands!"

From the expression on his face the Algerine seemed to know what Arthur was saying and he hit him several times more with the lash.

Deciding belatedly to abandon any further attempt to seize the merchantman in such heavy weather, the privateer captain gave orders to shorten sail. Scudding before the wind, the crippled corsair returned to port where shattered oars and men were replaced. With little delay the ship put to sea again, this time

with a new captain. Arthur never knew that the former captain received merely a reprimand for poor seamanship and no punishment whatever for the deaths and injuries that had resulted from his stupidity.

Arthur's education in the refinements of cruelty and degradation went on apace. His body became almost insensible to pain but no amount of punishment could diminish the activity of his mind. In the dead of night Meg's face would appear before him and he would weep in an agony of longing. Even with the stench of the slave deck in his nostrils he could still remember the lovely woman smell of her as she stood with her head pillowed against his breast and her soft arms about his neck. Over and over he wondered what effect his unexplained disappearance must have had on her sensitive soul. How had she taken it? How long would it be before she found out that he had not left of his own accord? Would she ever find out? Would she connect his abduction with Parkman? Would she ever understand that his enforced sudden departure was an attempt to discredit him in her eyes? That brought him to consideration of Parkman's intentions. What had the vindictive old man planned to do with him? It was obvious that Parkman could not have foreseen that the *Gull* would be intercepted by pirates but how else could he have schemed to keep him out of Wiggins Valley—have him killed? That eventuality no longer held any terror for Arthur. Death seemed preferable to the hell in which he now must live out his days. In any case, Parkman had won. There was no escape from his servitude and Meg would never believe that he had really intended to marry her. He would be branded in her eyes as a liar, afraid to face up to the realities of marriage to a woman of wealth and refinement. The longer he dwelt upon the injustice of the fate that had befallen him the stronger became his desire for revenge. As time went on, that passionate desire became an obession that threatened corrosion of his sensitive nature. In moments of respite from the oar he would sit with shaggy head bowed in fervent prayer to the Deity, whose compassion he had begun to doubt, that something, anything would happen to set him free—free for one purpose only: to slake his feverish thirst for revenge upon the man he had once hoped would be his father-in-law. Nothing else mattered.

Chapter 22

Commerce between the Barbary States of north Africa, particularly Algiers, and France had for centuries been mutually advantageous, despite the intermittent warfare that marred the relations between the nations on opposite shores of the Mediterranean. In the 1790s France maintained a consolate in the highly fortified city of Algiers and seemed to ignore the frequent skirmishes between the corsairs of their respective countries. It may be that the image of Algiers as an invincible bastion of Islam served as a deterrent to full-scale warfare, or it may be that France was too preoccupied with her own internal strife to make a determined effort at subjugation against the Algerian government. History records that attempt to have been postponed until the 1830s. Even such a breach of international relations as the Le Vacher incident had not been considered serious enough to precipitate a major war. During the tenure of French Consul Le Vacher, in the seventeenth century, trouble broke out over the seizure of French prize ships. In retaliation, French vessels fired on Algiers. One incident led to another until an enraged Algerine mob sacked the French consolate. Le Vacher was blamed for the trouble, or, more precisely, was made the scapegoat. He and several other French residents of Algiers were seized. Each was tied, belly first, to the mouth of a cannon and blown in the general direction of the French invasion fleet. Even in the face of such a horrifying incident France remained strangely tolerant. It was to be many years before French patience was finally exhausted.

While the reigning powers of each country refrained from declaring out-and-out war, the corsairs were under no such restraint among themselves. For example, if a French corsair captain needed to augment his crew of galley slaves, he felt no compunction over attacking a convenient Algerine galley and confiscating the ship along with the oarsmen. No serious consequences ever resulted from such forays since neither nation cared to take up arms in revenge.

So unsavory had become the reputation of the Barbary corsairs that by 1791 few merchant vessels, save French or British, dared venture into the waters of the Mediteranean. An infuriating number of United States merchantmen had fallen prey to the

robber ships of Algiers and their crews had been impressed into slavery at the oars of Algerine galleys. Tempers ran high among certain members of the United States Congress. Certain firebrands screamed for action to teach the Barbary pirates a lesson in deportment on the high seas. The hue and cry produced no appetite for revenge since cooler heads knew that the naval strength of the young nation was insufficient to undertake a mission of chastisement when, at the same time, protection was needed at home. Unfortunately, such a policy of nonintervention dashed any hope that relatives and loved ones may have had that their sons, fathers, and sweethearts might be released from bondage. Though he did not know it, Arthur Saint-Pierre was doomed to spend the rest of his life in slavery. He had already spent nearly three years at the oar. He had suffered the kind of treatment that reduces most men to the status of a whipped cur, trapped in a miserable state of existence unimaginable to free men.

For many days, the galley to which Arthur had been consigned prowled the waters of the Mediterranean, between Sicily and the Gibraltar Strait, without encountering either a potential victim or an enemy. The corsair captain, a descendant of a lordly line of Janissary Turks who had taken wives from among Maghribi women, was an arrogant battle-scarred veteran. His hatred of the French had been intensified, the previous year, by a skirmish with a French corsair who had nearly done him in. The French gunners had laid down a barrage that made a shambles of the Algerine's rigging and upper deck. The Algerine gunners, urged on by their enraged captain, had returned fire with such effectiveness that the Frenchman had finally withdrawn, leaving his intended victim to lick his wounds. Now, months later, in waters dangerously close to the French coastline, the Algerine was actually spoiling for an encounter with a French corsair. Merchant shipping was his assigned target but he harbored such a strong desire for revenge that he had approached within a day's sailing of the Strait of Benefacio, which separates Corsica and Sardinia. Had he made his approach from the east he might possibly have avoided contact with a formidable adversary, but he had followed a course roughly parallel to the west coast of Sardinia and was now in waters that the French navy considered to be its private preserve. When this fact was pointed out to him by his second

in command the captain replied contemptuously that he hoped some "misguided French infidel would cross my path! I shall teach him a lesson in naval warfare!"

He had not long to wait.

Early next morning the sails of a French frigate appeared on the horizon. With a blazing sun astern the Frenchman bore down upon the Algerine at such speed that there was no mistaking his intent. The Algerine lookout, staring into the blinding glare of sunlight, misjudged the speed of the French warship until it was almost within gunnery range. The frigate, larger than the corsair, was heavily armed and manned with a complement of veteran fighting men. From the outset of the encounter there was little doubt as to its conclusion. The French gunners went about their assignments with deadly accuracy. Concentrating on the gunports of the Algerine, they were able to put most of its guns out of action. Upon coming within range, the French musketeers sowed crippling injury and death among the Algerian deck hands. Grappling hooks were cast and secured and the French sailors swarmed aboard the Algerine to engage their enemies in deadly hand-to-hand swordplay. Hopelessly outmanned, the corsair captain realized that the battle was likely to be his last and ordered the galley slaves put to the sword—a common practice in such situations. While hand-to-hand combat raged above decks, Algerine butchers were methodically slaughtering the helpless wretches on the slave deck below.

Enraged by the sight of horrible, merciless butchery Arthur seized the length of chain that shackled him and, with a mighty, desperate heave, tore loose the heavy staple by which the end of the chain was secured to the bulkhead. Quickly he pulled the chain through and free of the loop in his metal waistband and was at last able to stand upright. He stepped out onto the catwalk and was set upon immediately by the portly overseer, whip in hand. As the lash fell across his shoulder Arthur seized the end of it and jerked the overseer off balance. Before his overweight assailant could recover, with a single devastating, crunching blow of his fist he stretched his hated tormentor senseless on the boards. At that moment, French sailors swarmed down the hatchway to the slave deck and shouted that the ship's captain was dead and the battle at an end. The Algerine butchers did not understand

French and turned on their enemies. There followed a brief struggle in which the butchers became the butchered until the only Algerines left alive were the dazed overseer and the unarmed pacemaker. These two were hustled up on deck where they were dismayed to find their captain dead and the galley in French hands. Below decks, Arthur and his freed benchmates were attempting to administer to the rowers not yet dead from their wounds. A French sailor, armed with musket and sword, scrambled down the hatchway and indicated to Arthur and his benchmates that they were to sit down and keep quiet. Arthur spoke to the sailor in French and for the first time in almost three years saw an answering smile on another man's face. Arthur asked the guard for his permission to approach him and talk. The sailor, while he was inclined to be sympathetic toward one who spoke his mother tongue, was somewhat put off by Arthur's wild-eyed appearance. He pointed his flintlock at Arthur and ordered him to stay where he was. The young sailor, while carrying out his orders to treat his charges with caution, was not averse to conversation and soon began to question Arthur as to his origin and how he happened to be numbered among Algerine galley slaves. As they continued to exchange words, faintly, from somewhere amid the horrible carnage, a voice was heard calling Arthur by name. Thoroughly amazed, Arthur explained that the man was calling his name and asked permission to speak with the wretch. The Frenchman gave his assent but warned Arthur against making any attempt to leave the slave deck.

Arthur's station had been the last tier near the bow of the galley. The man calling his name was shackled at a bench several tiers astern and on the port side of the gangway. He was obviously mortally wounded. Blood oozed from a long jagged sword slash in his left side and flowed with every heart beat from a deep wound in his chest.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?" demanded Arthur.

"Listen to me Saint-Pierre and don't interrupt. I don't know how long I can last. I had a hand in putting us here, but before I die I want you to know who your real enemy is. If you get out of this with a whole skin, take your revenge on Winston Parkman—he paid the bills!"

The dying man was Abel Quinn, Parkman's agent. In spite of his mortal wounds he kept his senses long enough to name all the men involved in the abduction. As he spoke, blood-tinged flecks of foam began to appear on his lips and his breath came in labored gasps, each threatening to be his last. Arthur looked upon him with a curious mixture of rage and compassion.

"What were you supposed to do with me?" he demanded.

"In Marseille you would have been conscripted aboard a French galley. I told Parkman that you could eventually work out your freedom but that was a lie, of course. No one ever escapes from galley slavery. Parkman wanted you out of circulation until his daughter gave up on you and married someone else."

Arthur stood with clenched fists and blazing eyes as he stared down at the miserable dying man.

"Why? Why did you do it? What kind of a man are you to become a party to such a damnable scheme? Parkman I can understand because I know something about his cruelty, and, if I live, I'll make him pay, but what possessed you to help him?"

Quinn stared at Arthur with feverish eyes.

"Money!" he gasped. "Money, Saint-Pierre! That's what makes rascals of us! And what good is it now? I'm going to die!"

Arthur stared down at the miserable dying man who had been so intimately involved in their sojourn in hell. He deemed it no more than fitting that Quinn should have been caught in his own trap and suffer the fate he had planned for someone else. Yet, in spite of his rage, Arthur's inborn decency asserted itself.

Quinn's eyes were closed.

"Quinn!" said Arthur sharply. "Quinn! Can you hear me? If you can, tell me someone I can notify, if I ever get home."

The dying agent managed to open his eyes and focused his gaze on Arthur's face.

"There's no one," he whispered. No one will mourn me—not one single soul—." His voice failed and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

When the nine surviving slaves were brought up on deck, Quinn was not among them.

Chapter 23

Arthur and his companions were put ashore at Marseille where they were able to scrub away some of the grime accumulated during their slavery. They were fed and given clothing. Their hair and beards were trimmed to civilized lengths. Arthur and some of the others preferred to go clean shaven and were overjoyed to be rid of the unkempt reminders of their servitude. After a week's recuperation at the naval base they were informed that they must shift for themselves. Two of the company were Muslims who disappeared the day after their release from the naval base. Having the advantage of being able to speak French, Arthur undertook to be the spokesman for the other six, who, like himself, were New Englanders. All were eager to seek passage home but were faced with a serious problem. United States shipmasters no longer considered Marseille accessible because of the constant threat of confiscation by Mediterranean pirates. France was in ferment and no one in authority seemed concerned over the fate of the rescued galley slaves. The authorities who might have been able to help were too preoccupied with internal affairs to worry about the problems of the foreigners in their midst. A furious upheaval was about to take place in French society. The inequities that had existed for centuries were about to be challenged. The nation's twenty-five million people were divided roughly into three classes. At the top were the privileged nobles. At the bottom were the peasants. For two centuries the despotic nobles, a wealthy minority, had maintained an iron grip on the reins of government. The life of the common man was a miserable existence. In rural districts the peasants were obliged to work without pay for their lordly superiors. In the cities the working people starved in wretched cellars and attics, with little to wear and not nearly enough to eat. Between the two extremes there was another minority group of fairly well-to-do shopkeepers, doctors, lawyers, and bankers, collectively known as the bourgeoisie. From this class sprang the leaders of the bloody French Revolution. The clergy, also, was divided into privileged and humble. The loftier stations in the church were held by the nobility, while the lowly priests worked among the underprivileged. It was among these priests that Arthur and his com-

panions found refuge and assistance. Through their charity and with the help of sympathetic peasants along the way, the seven liberated New Englanders eventually made their way safely across southern France. They were challenged occasionally by suspicious partisans, both of nobility and belligerent revolutionists but were usually allowed to pass, once their situation was made known. Not unexpectedly, Arthur had more difficulty than the others in explaining his presence because he was the only one who spoke French and could possibly have been sympathetic to one cause or the other. He was forced, on one occasion, to spend the night in a military *geole* until the priests succeeded in obtaining his release. After that, the entire party, warned by their friends, avoided all military installations and finally arrived in the ship building city of Bordeaux, on the Gironde River, some seventy miles from the Bay of Biscay. In Bordeaux there were excellent accommodations for translantic ships of heavy draft and all the sailors were able to sign on as crew members of ships bound for America. Arthur was no seaman, but the master of a Massachusetts merchantman, upon learning of the ordeal by slavery, agreed to take the unfortunate Frenchman aboard and allow him to earn his passage to Boston.

The wild elation with which Arthur greeted his release from slavery soon faded. The venom that had poisoned his mind during his months of confinement had its source in his passionate desire to make Parkman pay for his crime. During the weeks of travel across the south of France he could think of little else. At home he had never believed Parkman capable of criminal villainy, but now he had grim knowledge of the lengths to which the man was prepared to go in order to impose his will on two people whose only crime was loving each other. Over and over, during the long trek to Bordeaux, he vowed that Parkman would be punished and so would the men who had carried out his orders. The dying Quinn had named his two abductors—a man named Cooley and an Englishman named Bertie. Arthur had never been allowed to see either of them but he had forgotten neither the gravelly voice of the brute who had manhandled him nor the Cockney accent of his partner. He promised himself that he would seek them out and exact appropriate reparation for his humiliation and suffering.

Gradually, as the time neared to set sail for America, Arthur found his feverish desire for revenge giving way to more rational consideration of the actual means by which he hoped to take his vengeance. Cooley and Bertie would present no problem. He felt himself capable of administering a sound thrashing to each of those two worthies. Parkman was quite another matter. How to take revenge upon Meg's father? Physical punishment was out of the question. Parkman was an old man and, regardless of his evil nature, he was the father of the woman he had once hoped to marry. Though he was convinced that Meg was lost to him, he knew he would never do anything that might brand him a bully in her eyes. In spite of everything, old attitudes still possessed him. Much to his surprise he found his moral values still intact. He was able to recognize that the rage-inspired acts of retribution that had filled his mind during his bondage had been the hallucinations of a tortured brain.

At last, homeward bound, Arthur had ample time for reflection upon the fate that had befallen him and the chance set of circumstances that had set him free. And time and again he set himself the question: "Suppose I had never been given my freedom? When he thought upon that possibility, anger would boil up within him again. Vindictiveness had never been a part his nature, but it was with a great deal of reluctance that he forced himself to reconsider his vow to inflict some kind of severe punishment on Parkman. He asked himself what purpose it would serve other than the satisfaction he might take in hurting the man who had, without knowing it, doomed him to almost certain death. Chastising Parkman wouldn't bring Meg back to him and that was what really mattered. Gradually he began to temper his thirst for revenge by forcing himself to consider the question of whether or not Parkman might be right after all.

"Perhaps I'm not a fit husband for Meg," he muttered as he stood at the rail of the ship and stared into the semidarkness of early morning. It had taken him the entire night of reflection to reach that conclusion. In a few hours he would be ashore and on his way home but the thought brought him little satisfaction.

"Meg is a beautiful, wealthy woman." he thought. "She is popular among the best families in the territory and what have I to do with them? I'm nothing more than what I told her I was,

three years ago—a man who works with his hands and now a broken-down ex-galley slave, lucky to be alive. Perhaps I don't even own property any more. I have no idea what people do with abandoned houses and land."

There was no question in Arthur's mind that his hopes for a future with Meg at his side would never be realized. By now she was married to someone else—some one of the suitors her father had considered suitable for a woman of her breeding and social position. Not that he blamed Meg in any way. How else would she be expected to react to his disappearance with no hint of explanation? She could not be blamed for thinking that all his fine promises and protestations of love had been meaningless—that he had actually been afraid of taking on the responsibility of providing a home for her.

It was a bitter and discouraged Arthur Saint-Pierre who disembarked in Boston harbor. For his considerable services aboard the merchantman, the captain arranged for him to draw food and clothing from a dockside store. He also secured passage for Arthur aboard a coastwise packet scheduled to put in at Bath, when he had finally decided what he wanted to do. For some time Arthur had debated whether or not he should go home. Perhaps it would be better all around if I just stay away, he thought. But he was reluctant to give up the idea of searching for Cooley and Bertie and finally decided to go as far as Bath, where he would then make up his mind about going home. The Hamilton Lumber Company had an office in Bath and he could always get a job in case he decided to stay away from Wiggins Valley.

Upon his arrival in Bath, Arthur went first to the office of the Maritime Board and related the story of his abduction and slavery, as well as the miracle of his release. The business-like young man on duty listened to Arthur's incredible story and was politely sympathetic until Blackman's name was mentioned.

"Aha! That one!" exclaimed the young officer. "This sounds exactly like something Blackman would be mixed up in. I've been working in this office a little less than a year and a half and during that time there have been four complaints lodged against that man, alleging that he is still handling contraband. So far we have not been able to get enough solid evidence against him to make it worthwhile to summon him before the Maritime Board

Headquarters in Boston. Our chief is not here today. He won't be in until tomorrow. He was in charge here three years ago when you say you were shanghaied. Could you come back tomorrow and talk to him?"

"I'm sorry," said Arthur. "I've just about made up my mind to go home first. I've been in hell for three years and I need some time to get my bearings. Later, if you think my testimony will help in an action against Blackman I'll be glad to return and testify. I'll keep you informed of my whereabouts. I may even decide to stay in Bath. Incidently do you know where Blackman's office is? I was told by the master of the packet I arrived on that Blackman used to own a warehouse and docking facilities here."

"Yes, I know where his office is," replied the young officer, "but you won't find anyone there. It's been closed for about six months and the whole installation is up for sale. Rumor has it that Blackman is trying to move his overseas office operation to Boston. We know, however, that his coastwise sloops still dock upriver in Fort Western. By the way will you stay here long enough for me to write up what you have said in the log so you can sign it? I doubt whether it will do any good but I'd like to get it into the record anyway. Did you say that none of the six men who came home with you were aboard the *Grey Gull?"*

"I'll be glad to wait," said Arthur. "And yes, none of those men were on the *Gull*. Two were from Massachusetts and never heard of Blackman. The other four were all that was left of the crew of the *Albatross,* out of Falmouth, which was seized a few months before we were. Quinn and I were the only survivors from the *Gull*."

As soon as his deposition was drawn up and signed Arthur left and located the local office of the Hamilton Lumber Company, where he was immediately recognized by a payroll clerk who had known the Saint-Pierres for many years. Arthur recounted his experiences, amid expressions of amazement by his listeners, who were hearing for the first time the tale of villainy perpetrated by Parkman, one of their long-time customers. Supplied with scrip from the company funds, Arthur decided to set out for Fort Western that afternoon, on foot. He hoped to confront Blackman or at least his men, Cooley and Bertie.

The following morning the senior official in charge of the Bath

Maritime office was shown Arthur's deposition. His reaction was enthusiastic.

"That's the same young Frenchman that blacksmith from Wiggins Valley was talking about when he was here last year! I wish I could have talked to him! He could be the witness we need to nail Blackman to the cross! Get a letter off to the blacksmith. Name's Farrar, as I recall. It's in the file. If we can get Farrar and Saint-Pierre to testify at the same hearing, we might be able to relieve Mister Blackman of his papers!"

Arthur had not reached Fort Western on the previous afternoon. He had found, to his chagrin, that his legs had become weakened by months of sitting at the oar. After a few miles he had developed cramps in his legs and had sat down to rest. His only consolation was that the rest of him was as strong as his legs were weak. When he finally arrived within sight of Fort Western he camped by the trail and slept the night. The next morning, by means of discreet inquiry, he found Blackman's warehouse. Arthur sauntered around the end of the building where he saw a bearded giant loading barrel staves onto a sloop tied up at the dock.

All his instincts told him the man was Cooley.

"Your name Cooley?" asked Arthur with studied truculence in his voice.

The big man, carrying a bundles of staves in his arms, turned and glared at Arthur.

"Yeah, I'm Cooley. What of it?"

For an instant Arthur's eyes blazed. That voice! He had never forgotten it!

"Mister Cooley," said Arthur with icy deliberation, "I'm Arthur Saint-Pierre and I'm going to give you a thrashing for what you did to me three years ago."

Cooley stood open mouthed for an instant and then his armful of staves slipped from his grasp as his massive frame shook with laughter.

"Now ain't that rich!" he said between guffaws. "You're goin' to thrash me! You got it all wrong, boy! Nobody thrashes Cooley—leastways not a skinny scarecrow, back from the dead! You better go on home before you git hurt! You don't know who you're talkin' to!"

"Ah, but I do." said Arthur without raising his voice. "I'm

looking at a braying jackass who can't successfully attack anyone except with a club!"

Cooley's laughter died in his throat, as Arthur strode toward him. Cooley kicked the bundle of staves out of the way and came at Arthur with a rush. Arthur stepped quickly aside and delivered a powerful blow to Cooley's midriff that stopped the big man in his tracks as he doubled over and gasped for breath.

Arthur stood calmly with hands on hips while the startled giant regained his breath. Twice more Cooley charged. Twice more Arthur struck with the force of a battering ram. Tears of mingled rage and pain streamed down Cooley's cheeks.

"You bastard," he snarled, "when I git my hands on you I'll break you in two!"

"But Mister Cooley, you'll never get your hands on me," taunted Arthur, beginning to be a little conscience stricken. It was clear that he had Cooley at his mercy, and he wondered why he wasn't enjoying it more. While in captivity he had mentally thrashed an unknown enemy with a gravelly voice, not once but a dozen times over, and had experienced a fantasized feeling of satisfaction over his victim's suffering. Now, in actual encounter, Arthur's anger had begun to diminish with the very first blow.

Far from being convinced that he was in trouble, Cooley yelled like an Indian on the warpath and made yet another bull-like, incautious charge with arms outstretched. This time Arthur calmly stepped almost within the big man's grasp. Putting all his galley-trained strength behind the blow, he hit Cooley squarely on the point of his chin with a force that would have broken the neck of a smaller man. Cooley's eyes glazed and he slumped to the deck in a heap of unconscious, quivering flesh.

Arthur waited until Cooley regained his senses and sat up.

"I hope you've had enough, Mister Cooley," said Arthur solicitously.

"Yeah, yeah, I had enough!" growled Cooley rubbing his jaw. "Where'n hell did you learn to fight! You don't look hefty enough to hit like that!"

"You're partly to blame yourself," said Arthur scowling. "You never should have carried me aboard the *Grey Gull*. I went through hell because of what you people did to me! I spent three years pulling an oar in an Algerine galley. If the experience doesn't

kill you it does wonders for your muscles! Incidentally, where are Blackman and your partner, Bertie?"

"Blackman ain't here," said Cooley. "Went down to Boston last week. Bertie's dead—fell overboard and drowned before I could git to him. I never knew the little shrimp couldn't swim! Say, how come you know all our names? You never seen us before."

"I had an excellent source of information—another one of Parkman's paid jackals, Abel Quinn. You can tell your conniving boss that Quinn's dead. He was slaughtered by one of those butcher sons of Allah! It's a miracle that I'm here to tell about it!"

"So you know about Parkman, eh!" said Cooley. "Then you damned well know he paid for havin' you put away. Bertie and me was doin' what we was paid to do, same as Blackman. What do you figure on doin' about Parkman?"

"I'll deal with Parkman when the time comes," said Arthur. "And by the way, you can also tell your boss that the Maritime Board knows all about what you people did and Mister Blackman will probably lose his papers."

Arthur lingered for a few moments and watched Cooley work his jaw up and down to determine whether it might be broken. It wasn't. Arthur's conclusion was that Cooley's full beard must have softened the blow.

"Goodbye, Mister Cooley. Believe me, it was a pleasure to make your acquaintance!" said Arthur and strode away, leaving the chastened Cooley still sitting on the dock and glaring balefully at Arthur's retreating figure.

As Arthur walked away he realized that he must never lose his temper in a fist fight. His hands had become lethal weapons, and while he took some satisfaction in administering well-deserved punishment he was thankful that he had not killed Cooley.

Chapter 24

Arthur's indecision about returning to Wiggins Valley lasted for three days. He wandered about the settlement. He spent hours sitting by the river and watching the boats and barges plying the Kennebec. His homesickness was extreme, but there was an ache in his heart that would not go away. Most of the

heat had gone out of his rage at Parkman, although he still had a strong desire to at least confront him and see whether there was any shame in the man. Balanced against that wish was the dread of finding that Meg was married to another man. Try as he would, he could not convince himself that she would still be waiting for him to return. Until he had landed in Boston there was no one in the United States that knew he was alive, and after three years of silence, or even less time than that, how could anyone be expected to believe that he had survived? There was absolutely no way that Meg could ever have found out that his disappearance was not his fault, or so he thought, and it was surely asking too much of her to remain faithful to her promise to be his bride. Their time as lovers had been too brief. His hold on her affection had been too new—too tenuous to bridge the years. After all that he had suffered, his aversion to further agony was extreme. Why not let well enough alone and just stay away? He could get a job anywhere. That was no problem and he would save himself the punishment of seeing the only woman he had ever loved as the wife of another man. Thus Arthur argued with himself for hours until at last he arrived at a decision to go home anyway and see what had become of his property. Meg probably would not be living in the valley, he told himself. Any man she would have married would be among the Norridgewock crowd and would expect her to take her place in the society for which she was so well suited. And so, after much indecision, Arthur talked himself into going home. He found a livery stable and arranged for the use of a riding horse. The white-haired old hostler, when told his customer's name and address, said, "Saint-Pierre from Wiggins Valley, eh? Might you be related to Ed Saint-Pierre?"

"Yes sir, I am his son," replied Arthur.

"Well I'll be danged," said the old man. "I ain't seen Ed for at least fifteen years. How's he getting along these days?"

"I'm sorry to say he died, three years ago," said Arthur.

"No! that's hard to believe," said the livery man. "As I recall that would put him in his forties when he passed on. He was a rugged man. What happened?"

Whereupon Arthur and the old man engaged in a lengthy exchange. Arthur related the story of his kidnapping and escape

to the accompaniment of exclamations of amazement from the old hostler. In the course of the conversation, it developed that Arthur's father and the livery stable man had served in the same company under Benedict Arnold, during the march on Quebec.

Arthur deliberately lingered for nearly two hours in conversation with the grizzled old hostler. Subconsciously, he was delaying his departure for home. In spite of his decision to return, he was still torn between a desire to be back in his valley and a dread of what he might find there. Reluctantly, at last, he set out upon the last leg of his journey home, back to the valley where his hopes for happiness had been born, only to be dashed almost immediately through the cruelty of Winston Parkman. There was no question in his mind that Parkman's purpose in having him abducted had been accomplished. As he had done many times since his release he again applied himself to analyzing the situation from Meg's point of view. The conclusion was always the same. How hollow must his declarations of love have appeared to her! On the very day of his disappearance he had sent her a letter filled with high-sounding promises she must have come to believe he never intended to keep; not after the way he had vanished, leaving not a single word of explanation; not after three years of utter silence as to his whereabouts. It was simply impossible that she could have waited. Waited for what? For a false lover whose reason for leaving must have been beyond her comprehension? After such disillusionment why should she care? Why, indeed, would anyone care whether or not he might return? Even the townspeople of Wiggins Valley must have wondered at his behavior and put him down as being unreliable. Many times, during his tortured existence, he had shuddered at the cruel hurt that must have been done to Meg's gentle soul, the soul of a loving, trusting angel who had promised to be his forever. By nature a passionate man, Arthur's reasoning was colored by the intensity of his emotions.

It was a heartsick Arthur Saint-Pierre who found himself, at dusk, a few miles south of Norridgewock. He camped by the trail where he slept but little. Three years in purgatory was hardly the ideal preparation for the prospect he imagined himself to be facing.

At dawn he was again in the saddle. Upon arriving within

sight of the city he decided to avoid recognition, if possible. He urged his mount at a fast pace through the outskirts of the city and met no one he knew, for which he was thankful. He was in no mood to exchange pleasantries with anyone. Hollow-eyed and unshaven, his appearance matched the drabness of his thoughts as he travelled the familiar road. Nearing the valley he drew up his mount beside the rock where Meg had sat and wept tears of happiness when he had kissed her. Where was she now? Married to some man of her own station—some man better favored than he would ever be—some other man who now had the right to claim the sweetness of her embrace. He stifled a sob and, with fingers leathery from months at the oar, brushed away tears that welled up from a soul in torment. Angered by his weakness, and ashamed of his tears, he dug his heels into the startled horse, urging him to a gallop that soon brought him within sight of the Parkman mansion.

Arthur twice raised the ornate knocker on the Parkman front door and let it drop. Fidelia Gooch opened the door and gave a shriek that she immediately stifled by clapping both hands over her mouth. Her thin face turned ashen and she stared wildly at the apparition standing before her.

"Merciful Heaven!" she gasped. "Arthur Saint-Pierre! Where in the world did you come from!"

"From Hell, Mrs. Gooch," said Arthur in a grim voice. "From Hell, and I want to see the man who sent me there! No—wait! Is Meg here?"

"Oh no," said Mrs. Gooch. "Margaret hasn't lived here for many months."

Arthur's broad shoulders sagged perceptibly.

"Of course. That is no more than I expected," said Arthur. "What about Parkman? Is he here or at the mill?"

"Mister Parkman doesn't go to the mill or anywhere else!" said Mrs. Gooch.

Arthur looked puzzled.

"I don't understand what you are saying. If he's home I want to see him! I want to watch his face when he sees me! I want to see him squirm when I tell him how close he came to being responsible for my murder! I want to show him the lash marks on my back!"

For the first time in his life Arthur saw Fidelia Gooch's eyes fill with tears.

"Oh Arthur!" she quavered. "You may see him if you must, but he won't know you. His mind has gone!"

Arthur could not have said whether his reaction to the news was one of frustration, satisfaction, relief, or an unfamiliar mixture of all three.

"Are you sure he won't recognize me?"

"Oh yes, I am sure," said Mrs. Gooch. "Come, I'll show you. He is in the parlor."

Mrs Gooch led Arthur down the familiar long hall and into the richly furnished parlor. Parkman sat in a large leather chair in front of the marble framed fireplace. His eyes were closed. Arthur was shocked at his appearance. Parkman had never had much hair and now he was completely bald. Dark grey circles rimmed his eyes sunk in a sallow, cadaverously emaciated face. His sickly, parchment-like skin seemed stretched taut over bones that threatened to break through the fragile surface. His bony hands were like claws resting on the heavy blanket covering his knees. As Arthur stepped closer to Parkman's chair a musty odor assailed his nostrils and he recoiled. It was the odor of the dying.

Arthur looked at Mrs. Gooch in shocked silence.

"He's been like that for almost a year," she said. He's beyond any punishment in this life. I doubt he'll fare as well in the next."

Arthur raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Yes," she said, "he will have much to answer for. I suspected long ago that he was responsible for your disappearance. When you said you wanted to see the man who sent you to Hell, I knew what you meant."

At that moment Parkman stirred and opened his eyes—eyes devoid of any sign of intelligence or recognition of his surroundings. His gaze remained fixed in a vacant stare when Arthur moved away from his line of vision. He continued to stare straight ahead for a few seconds and then his eyes closed. Arthur had the eerie feeling that he had just seen a corpse open and close its eyes.

Arthur fled the room. In his days of bondage he had thirsted for revenge against the dying man but he had never expected to be confronted by a man in the grip of a worse fate than any he had conjured up for Parkman during his most vengeful fantasies.

Suddenly he wanted nothing so much as to be out and away from that house—that ornate pile, in the midst of which its mindless owner sat with the angel of death hovering over him.

Mrs. Gooch caught up with Arthur at the front door. She was a remarkably different Mrs. Gooch than he had ever known—sad of eye and subdued of manner. Even her voice had lost the raspy quality once all too familiar to Arthur.

"Arthur, don't you want to know more about Margaret? I was so upset over what you were saying about Mister Parkman that I never finished what I wanted to tell you about her."

Arthur looked at Mrs. Gooch with eyes so full of misery that she touched his sleeve in an involuntary gesture of sympathy.

"Oh Arthur, I should have told you right away. You must go home at once. Margaret has been very ill for a long time. She is living in your cabin."

Arthur started as if struck in the face. He seized Mrs. Gooch by the shoulders so roughly that she winced.

"What are you saying!" he said in a voice hoarse with emotion. "Why is she living in my cabin?"

Mrs. Gooch found it impossible to remain unmoved by Arthur's passionate outburst. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"Oh Arthur," she said between sobs, "it is such a sad thing. Margaret never told me so personally but folks say she wanted to live there so she could have your things around her, as if you were still alive. Life has been very hard for her while you have been gone. She had a terrible fight with her father and has never set foot in this house since that time. Somehow she must have learned that her father was responsible for your disappearance. As if that wasn't enough, she has been very sick for weeks. Lately folks have been saying that she doesn't seem to care whether she gets well or not. Now, go home, boy! You are what she needs!"

Foremost in Arthur's mind was the glorious thought that, by some miracle, Meg was still his, just as she had promised. He was like a man possessed. He almost smothered Mrs. Gooch in a tremendous bear hug, tore open the front door, and raced to the hitching post where his mount stood. Leaping into the saddle he put the horse to a gallop down the hill, across the bridge, and half way up the eastern slope where it became obvious that the poor beast could not make it to the top at such a furious

pace. Arthur slid out of the saddle and began to run up the bridle path.

Midge Bonneau, working at the clothesline, saw Arthur racing up the hill. She stared for a moment then suddenly recognized him. She ran to meet him and, in her excitement, forgot her English.

"Oh! Monsieur Saint-Pierre! *Quel miracle! Grâce á Dieu!"*

"Midge!" exclaimed Arthur. "What are you doing here?"

Midge managed to contain herself long enough to explain, then her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Mister Saint-Pierre!" she said. "It is so wonderful that you have come back! Miss Margaret has missed you so! She cries all the time because she thinks you are dead!"

"I know, Midge," said Arthur, "and I very nearly was. Is she in the cabin?"

"Yes. She was asleep a little while ago. Oh! It will be such a shock when she sees you!"

Arthur's eyes were troubled.

"What is wrong with her? Is it her heart?"

"The doctor says there is nothing wrong with her heart," said Midge, "but I know better. People's hearts can break and I know hers is broken. That's why she doesn't care whether she gets well."

"Don't worry, Midge," said Arthur. "We'll get her well. There are other doctors. I'll take her to Boston."

Arthur ran toward the cabin door. Midge watched him through her tears as he suddenly checked his stride and opened the door cautiously. At a glance he saw that the room looked little different than when he had left. His double-deck bunk was still against the west wall and there, in the lower bunk, Margaret lay asleep with her back to the door. In quick silent strides Arthur reached her side and went down on his knees. With his heart in his throat he called softly, "Meg darling."

Margaret awoke and turned toward the sound of his voice. Recognition was instantaneous. Her eyes filled with tears and with a pitifully weak cry of joy she stretched out her pale, thin arms to him. He bent his head down and her fingers caressed each side of his unshaven face.

"Oh Arthur, my darling! Thank God you have come back to me!"

Arthur was weeping with mingled joy and apprehension as he kissed her gently.

"Oh Meg, my wonderful sweetheart, you are so thin and pale. I must take you to Boston right away to see the best doctor there is."

Spots of color appeared in Margaret's pale cheeks and her smile was beautiful to behold.

"Arthur, my love, don't you know you are the only doctor I need!"

And she drew his head down to her breast.